

# ゲーマーズ!

雨野景太と青春コンティニュー

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葵せきな

Keita Amano and youth continue



ファンタジア文庫



雨野景太と  
青春  
コンティニュー



ゲーマーズ!

G A M E R S

# C O N T E N T S



GAMERS

Keita Amano and youth continue

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「やっぱり……ふ、二人は、お互いが、  
いるから、《ゲーム部》より、《ゲーム同好会》を……」

「『萌え』や『可愛さ』つてのは  
ゲームにとって重大な  
「要素なんだよ！」



### 雨野景太

Keita Amano

ゲームが趣味の平凡な高校  
三年生。コンシューマーから  
ソシャゲまでゲーム全般が好  
きだが、腕前はイマイチ。クラ  
スではぼっち気味。

「あのシリーズの魅力はなんと  
いっても音楽！」

「なんでお前等、  
すぐ喧嘩腰になるんだよ……」



### 亜玖璃

Aguri

上原の彼女。ギャルっぽい口  
調や見た目だが、無邪気な良  
い子。少々アホの子なのが玉  
にきず。ゲーム知識は皆無。

### 上原祐

Tasuku Uehara

雨野のクラスメイト。クラスの  
リーダー的ポジションで彼女  
持ちという典型的なリア充だ  
が、実はゲーム好きな一面も。

### 星ノ守千秋

Chiaki Hoshinomori

口べた、ぼっちのゲーム好き  
な高校二年生。実際にプレイ  
するのはもちろん、フリーゲー  
ム制作も行っている。雨野と  
は価値観の違いから犬猿の仲。





天道花憐

Karen Tendo

完璧スペックをほこり学園一の美少女でありながら、生粋のゲーマーでゲーム部部长。雨野をゲーム部に勧誘するうちに、別の感情が芽生え始め……!?

「(明日こそ雨野君、ゲーム部に来ないかしら。  
……あ、べ、別に、  
彼がゲーム部に来なくても戦力的に何一つ問題ないし、  
私が来てほしいわけでもないけどね!)」

# ゲーマーズ!

G A M E R S

雨野景太と青春コンティニュー

Keita Amano and youth continue

START



# Prologue - Keita Amano and Youth Continued

I couldn't really relate to an average male main character that likes a peaceful everyday life.

Even though I myself was a painfully average high schooler.

Let me use an example.

A story that starts with a beautiful female childhood friend waking you up from bed in the morning, colliding with a tsundere transfer student as you turn at a junction on your way to school, A cool beauty female senpai who thinks highly of you at school, and an impish yet cute female junior who stays close to you for no reason. Damned innate normie main character.

[ -- Actually, I really like my plain everyday life-- ]

After hearing him narrate this lazily, the only emotions that welled up within me is...

“Duh!”

I retorted as I exhausted all my blood and sweat. I couldn't find any bit I could relate to.

On the other hand, there would be occasional works that were the complete opposite of the earlier description, with main characters that felt really realistic, with few beautiful girls and living a 'plain everyday life'. But if you ask me if I could relate to them, that would be a different matter. Here's another example...

[Dusk. The sound of the students' idle chatter and laughter, along with the soft echo of the wind orchestra practices, were mixed with the noise of the sports club coming from the gymnasium. As usual,

the school day ends plainly...]

I, Amano Keita, who was studying in the second year of high school -- really loved such a plain everyday life from the bottom of my heart.

Even if I said this in the tone of a tough guy--

“I-Is this a manly warrior who had braved countless battlefields...?”

In the end, I couldn't help feeling a difference in values that was different from the example earlier. That doesn't mean I dislike such main characters, in fact, I am quite fond of them. But relating to them was another issue.

In conclusion, a person who had lived an absolutely plain life since birth... Especially boys and girls in their teens, I couldn't imagine at all why they would like their plain everyday life from the bottom of their hearts.

At least I -- Amano Keita, a plain 16 year old high schooler--

Still spend every night deluding in my bed about being summoned as a hero to a different world.

.....

Eh, you're already in your second year of highschool, if you have the time to do that, think seriously about tertiary education or joining the workforce

-- To be honest, I felt the same way too, but I just couldn't help it.

Before I knew it, I realized that I had been dreaming about not being plain anymore.

When traveling on vacation, I would hope on becoming a detective dragged into a murder inside a mansion on a isolated island; When I visit the convenience store at night, I would feel nervous, wondering



if I would run into a heroine that hunts monsters in the dark night; When there was nothing to do in class, I will try to levitate a mechanical pencil with telekinesis, attempting that about once every month.

And of course, I didn't really believe those things would really happen.

But I hope that I am permitted to live on with the hope of striking the lottery.

That was because --

My personality was despairingly 'plain'.

Amano Keita, 16 years old, second year of high school. Blood type A, zodiac sign: cancer. Short and thin.

I live together with my parents and a brother two years younger than me, a family of four. I didn't feel any trouble growing up in my middle class family, my paternal and maternal grandparents are still alive, and our relationship with our relatives were cordial.

It was probably thanks to me and my brother being raised as good kids, even though we would fight sometimes, our family had never flipped out on each other. The relationship of our parents were wonderful, and every year or two, our family will go on a domestic vacation trip (mostly nearby places).

My school club experience was by joining baseball during elementary and middle school. But I only treated it as a place to hang out with friends, and didn't put much passion into it. I lacked talent, and was an unathletic burden instead. When the match was a blow out for either team, I would be sent out on the last inning as an act of charity. To be frank, I had no intention of troubling the team by playing. And of course, I still participated seriously.

I wasn't too stupid, and had confidence in my academics. I don't know if I was dragged down by my arrogance or I played too much

games, my results dropped a lot in middle school, and ended up entering a public high school that had a low entrance score... Otobuki High School.

After I graduated, as most of the friends I knew got into other schools, my social network had to start over from zero.

But back then, I hadn't grown out of the super naive nature of elementary schoolers and thought: "I will make friends naturally!" So I started really late, and didn't get to know anyone really well before a year past.

After the classes were reshuffled for my second year of high school, I was still spending my time after school playing my phone or portable game console alone after school. Even though I was the so called 'loner', and would be mocked and laughed at occasionally, no one really bullied too openly. I was the type that was used to staying at the bottom of the campus relations pyramid.

Naturally, when I talk to my classmates every now and then, the contents were really superficial.

Speaking of which, of all the conversations I had in my high school life, the friendliest ones was with a loud boy chatting with a group beside me...

"Neh neh, Amano, which type of JUMP reader are you?"

"Huh? Ah, erm, well, I read in a normal way, from the cover page in sequence..."

"Isn't that right! See, I told you guys Amano is the in sequence type! You all owe me a drink!"

That was how it went. And I was in a great mood the day that conversation took place.

... To the people who are saying in their heart: "Aren't you one level beneath 'plain'..." please be quiet for a while, I will feel hurt if I hear

that. Living my life plainly made my heart as brittle as glass. I was the type who would become depressed the entire day if the game I like was criticized harshly.

Getting a girlfriend was just a fantasy for a guy like me. The love related event I experienced in high school was just...

[ When I was loitering around aimlessly on campus after school was out, I ran into a couple french kissing at a rarely used staircase, as they caressed each other's body. Even though time stopped for an instance, it would seem weird if I turn back. So I pretended I didn't see anything and walked pass them. When I was feeling relieved after going downstairs, I heard the couple upstairs bursting into laughter for some reason. ]

That was my experience... To be honest, I wasn't sure if my reaction back then was correct.

Ah, you want me to talk about my own love story? Eh~~ if 2D could be counted -- Ah, no? I see. Well...

Yes, I had zero experience.

Cough. Anyway, I couldn't be anymore plainer, without any aura of popularity or outstanding talent. But on the other hand, there wasn't anything negative about me that attract attention too.

For everyone in class, I was like a background 'mob character'. That's me, Amano Keita.

If I had to point out my only character trait, that would be my name was very similar to the main character of Yo-kai w\*tch, and also...

"My hobby is gaming."

That was all. You could probably tell from my earlier self introduction that I like gaming. I like video games from the bottom of my heart. There wasn't any special reason, I just like it



unconditionally.

I felt the happiest whenever I played an interesting game, and I could overcome most detestable things if there were fun games to play. This behaviour helped release the chuuni urge building in my heart. From this perspective, even though I wasn't summoned to a different world, I think it was great to enjoy fun games in this world. That's how much I love gaming.

The gaming time after reaching home and before dinner could only be described as my utmost happiness. I would occasionally scream and shout as I played against my brother in video games, such times filled with laughter were really precious.

However... There were countless people in the world who liked gaming to such an extent.

In conclusion, my trait wasn't really a trait, and my character didn't have much personality.

And so, the story that I am about to recount--

This story about me which very much goes against my personal preference, and regrettably.

After blabbering so much, in the end--

The story still started with the plain high school boy being chatted up by a beautiful girl, in a cliché and astonishingly relatable way--

-- This is a story about gaming.

# **Chapter 1 - Amano Keita and the People Who are Guided.**





There were existences that were out of the league of mere mortals.

For example, there were idolized singers, athletes performing on the international stage, the wealthy directors of large corporations and 2D waifus, it differs from person to person.

Their status and positions were too different with no intersecting points. Even if they met miraculously, keeping up conversation or interaction would be highly difficult.

They were existences that were out of the league of mere mortals.

Therefore...

“Eh, pardon me. You are a student from Otobuki... correct?”

“Huhh?”

A certain day in June, after school was out, in a certain game shop where the atmosphere was casual under the setting sun.

When the top beauty of Otobuki High School Tendo Karen spoke to me without any warning... I, Amano Keita's brain was completely frozen, and responded with a weird sound without even thinking.

My eyes scanned all over the place in order to obtain more information, and looked at her from head to toe indiscreetly.

The first thing that drew my attention was her long blonde hair. It wasn't the blonde dyed haphazardly by delinquents in desolated salons, but a healthy blonde that was the real thing. I didn't remember the details, but she seemed to have either half or a quarter caucasian heritage.

But unlike her blonde hair, her face was really Japanese, even though her big bright eyes were light blue, she somehow gave an impression of innocence.

Just like a typical beauty from an anime or game.

Maybe it was her slender model like body built, the Otobuki High School uniform everyone was wearing looked really neat on her.

“...?”

“Ah.”

I couldn't help staring, and Tendo-san looked at me baffled with her head tilted. In contrast to me whose heart was racing, Tendo-san said naturally: “Ah, right.” then shyly placed her hand on her chest, and moved her lips.

“I am in the second year class A of Otobuki High, Tendo Karen. Pleased to meet you, eh...”

“Huh? Ah, well, eh, I am Amano. Amano...”

I instinctively state my family name in a panic. When I saw Tendo-san smiling silently at me as she waited for me to continue, I came to my senses and added:

“A-Amano Keita. Class F... ah, second year.... Ah, not that, yes, I am studying in Otobuki too!”

I introduced myself in bits and pieces in response. Not only was I stuttering shamefully, my face was sweating because of nervousness. My fringe stuck onto my forehead, and my slightly trembling body made my teeth chatter. I tried my best to calm myself so the other party won't be able to tell how shaken I was... But the more anxious I was, the more wasted my effort became, and my entire face slowly turned red.

I was aware of the disgusting, introverted ‘stay at home boy’ aura I was emitting, there should be a limit to how much of a fool I was making myself.

Tendo-san didn't mind my suspicious actions at all, and extended her smooth and delicate hand out to me with an even friendlier attitude.

“Ah, that’s great, we are in the same grade. Nice to meet you, Amano-kun.”

“Hmm... Yes... Eh... Ah.”

And I finally realized I was still holding the box of a galgame in my hand, and placed it back onto the shelf in a hurry. I wanted to shake her hand -- but at this moment, I realized a guy like me would be touching Tendo-san’s hand and hesitated. Afraid that it would be bad manners, I wiped my hands onto my pants, reached out again before regretting it; Wrong, wiping it like that would make the other party feel more disgusted--

“... Nice, to, meet, you!”

“Ah...”

-- As I was still thinking about it, Tendo-san forcefully took my hand and shook it.

As for the sensation of her hand -- I couldn’t spare the effort to enjoy it, and could only stand there in a daze.

... No matter how I thought about this... Our palms touching seem like an unreal situation to me.

Afterall... She is the famous Tendo Karen, why is she talking to someone like me...

I looked at her smile and once again, I realized how abnormal this situation was.

Tendo Karen. On the other end of the spectrum, she was the student at the very top of the social pyramid on campus.

With great looks, fantastic grades, quick-wittedness and excellence in sports, she was a beauty with attributes so good that it seemed unreal. In Otobuki High School which had low entrance score, and mediocre reputation, she literally stood out from the crowd.



Even though she wasn't a television celebrity, her standing in Otobuki was akin to a goddess-- also known as 'school idol'.

However, she wasn't a frog in a well. As Tendo Karen had a strong support in such a small world, her influence was huge. Just the term 'idol' would not be enough to describe her. She was the common topic among the students of Otobuki, the fashion setter, idol, mascot, spiritual symbol and glory.

If a high schooler in the region was asked about their impression of Otobuki high, right after the customary 'a public school with slightly low entrance score', you will hear: "That's the high school Tendo Karen studies in."

That's how important she was.

Her personality was really popular, even though she had the confidence and capability nurtured by her excellent traits, she didn't have a shred of arrogance about her. In fact, one could even feel a sense of nobility (That was what I learned from the gossips of the boys in class).

On the other hand, I am a background character type solo player who didn't even have a single friend in high school.

"....."

... Yup, no matter how I racked my brains, I couldn't think of the reason why Tendo Karen was chatting me up. Or rather, it was a miracle that she was looking at someone like me.

Eh, d-do I have to say it. My chuuni tendencies had seeped deep into my bones, so I don't deny that I fantasized about someone as famous as her falling for me in a dramatic way.

But even when I was fantasizing that, I couldn't think of any concrete setting for why she would fall for me, which took a lot of effort.

Don't laugh, but I used the cliché fantasy of 'making an important promise when we were young' as a compromise.

And so, the situation right now fell too far from my expectations, and instead of elation and anticipation, I felt more troubled... and uneasy... Yes, uneasy.

D-Did I do something weird? I hope it's not a big problem...

Even though I was always craving for an experience out of my ordinary everyday life, I would hesitate timidly and fear that my steady lifestyle would end. I always talked about chuuni stuff, but my wish for 'nothing bad to happen' was stronger than 'I hope something good happens'. I had the psychology of being a nobody. How shameful.

As all sorts of emotions stirred in my heart, Tendo-san pulled back her hand after shaking mine, she asked me with a smile still hanging on her face:

"Amano-kun, do you like it?"

"Huh!?"

The sudden question made my heart race again. N-No way, I would never dream that in my plain everyday life, I would be confessed to out of the blue by a girl out of my league--

"I mean video games."

"Of course! I knew it! I actually knew it from the start, and only acted shaken on purpose!"

"?"

"Ah, it's n-nothing..."

Oh no, I was too flustered and was leaning towards being anxious like a bipolar personality. It was probably really disgusting to

someone I just met. I unwittingly spoke as if I was talking to my family.

Tendo-san didn't seem to mind, and asked with her eyes on the game I was holding a moment ago:

"Amano-kun, you were holding something just now right? Eh—"

Oh shit. It was embarrassing to be caught browsing gal games, and the game I picked up randomly was...

"Eh, this one right? Let me see... The first love simulation game that features only blonde beauties, a mischievous adventure game with eye candies, 'Golden tricks'...?"

"Love it! I love!"

"Hmm?"

"Ah."

I answered the previous question loudly in order to divert her attention from the game, but the timing was unfortunate.

Tendo-san brushed her blonde hair with her fingertip as she looked between me and the game frantically, her cheeks slowly blushing--

"Ah, I, I mean all video games!"

"T-That's right! I knew that! I already understand, but I still felt embarrassed!"

Tendo-san seemed to be reacting to what I said a moment ago as she placed the game box backed onto the shelf in panic. And so, an indescribable feeling hung between the two of us, and the atmosphere was like a funeral... I want to disappear just like this, vanishing from the scene without leaving a single trace, as if 'Medoroa'<sup>[1]</sup> was cast on me'.

That might be so, it was fine for a disgusting otaku to suffer, but I

felt that I have to take responsibility for dragging Tendo-san into this awkward atmosphere.

Squeezing out all the courage I had, it was rare to see me trying to move the conversation along.

“Eh, generally speaking, I like all types of video games. T-That’s why, there isn’t any special meaning behind the game I was holding just now... Or rather, the concept of that game is too innovative, so I was intrigued about what the description on the back of the box...”

“Ah, I understand. That’s right, the description behind the game packaging is interesting, isn’t it?”

Tendo-san smiled at me gently. For an instant, I let it get to my head.

“Y-You understand too!? That’s right, the back of the packaging is so entrancing! Although I read ratings online and from magazines, I also placed a lot of importance on the synopsis on the back of the box too! It is different from the explanation found on the official website! I couldn’t resist the feeling of compressing and presenting the strong points of the game in such a small space! Speaking of the back of the package, the idea Metal Gear Solid<sup>[2]</sup> had was really creative--”

I blabbered all that out before I came to my senses and stopped. Oh no, what was I doing? I was usually quiet, but would keep chattering when I talk about things I like... That was so typical of me! How embarrassing! And even worse, the other party was the girl at the peak of the normies in Otobuki high! I messed up the scene so badly--

“Fufu...”

“? T-Tendo-san?”

However, Tendo-san’s reaction was completely opposite of what I expected, and she was softly laughing cheerfully. For an instant, I thought she was laughing at my pitiful state, but I didn’t feel such malicious intent.

As I was standing stiff confusedly, Tendo-san said with a joyous smile:

“My apologies for interrupting halfway. I couldn’t help myself because you are so passionate...”

“Ugh...”

H-How embarrassing! My face heated up again. However, Tendo-san didn’t look down on me and continued:

“How should I put this? You really match my ideal, I really want to praise myself for mustering up the courage to talk to you...”

“Huh? M-Match your ideal? Eh... You are referring to...”

This time, I was heating up for an entirely different reason. Eh... Judging from this... Could this be the route I thought up in my delusions about her falling for me!?

My heart was thumping hard, and Tendo-san straightened her back and looked right into my eyes for some reason.

“Erm, Amano-kun, if you don’t mind, would you like to...”

“!”

I-It’s here--! T-The moment of confession is here--

“... Join the Gamers Club with me?”

“Of course! I knew it! I already knew that you want me to join the game-- Huh? Wait... Game... Gamers... Club?”

The invitation came too unexpectedly, which left me dumbfounded.

But Tendo-san still acted like an angel... smiling sweetly at me.

There was nothing more interesting than playing games when I was in a good mood.

When I feel down, I couldn't invest much emotions no matter what masterpiece RPG it might be; But when I'm in a great mood, no matter what kind of unreasonable enemy wiped out my team and waste all the time I spent adventuring, I wouldn't sigh in depression, and would chuckle instead.

That was why, the me today--

“♪~~♪~~♪”

-- Could enjoy myself even though I was sitting in a corner of the classroom and playing social network games on my mobile phone.

Eh~~ Social Network Games aren't bad, how should I put it? I feel that I can empty my mind when I play this... I don't dislike it!

I liked the design that tempts players to pay cash, even though it usually frustrates me.

As I slowly completed my 'weekly mission', I hummed a song in a volume no one else could hear.

Even the usually unbearable 'after school sit in place forever alone time' felt trivial today. After all...

I recalled what happened after school yesterday and couldn't help snickering.

The famous Tendo Karen invited me to join the Gamers Club!

My campus life had always been covered in gloomy clouds, but I was suddenly facing a dramatic event that appeared out of nowhere.

The person I admired approached me, and on top of that, I had a feeling that I would get to know a lot of comrades who loved video games.

It would be hard for me to not get hyped in such a situation.

Actually after what happened yesterday, I went home and played



Super Smash Bros with my younger brother. For the entire game, I was so hyped that I was all smiles even when I lose, even my brother who was in the third year of middle school said “You look really disgusting!” But I couldn’t help it even if he said that.

Anyway, there was no entertainment better than playing games in a great mood!

I had to keep myself from snickering at school, but a background character like me won’t be noticed-- I thought as I continued playing with my phone in a great mood.

Speaking of which, Gamers Club huh? I never heard that Otobuki had such a club.

Even a self-proclaimed gaming enthusiast like me didn’t know.

But that was only natural, Tendo-san said that the current Gamers Club was just started by her. For some reason, the student populace totally didn’t know about this club.

I played around with the operating system of my phone as I slowly think back about what happened after school yesterday... After shifting location from the game store to a bench in a nearby park, I listened to what Tendo-san had to say.

“And for the Gamers club, even though I founded the club, I didn’t advertise to recruit members at all.”

Tendo-san said as she took out a small bottle of mineral water from her bag to drink.

Even though I was still very nervous about talking to her alone, I still did my best to pretend to be calm to avoid making a fool of myself.

“Thank you for enlightening me, But in that case-”

“Ah, your honourifics.”

“?”

Tendo-san looked at me troublingly with a frown.

“We are in the same grade, you can just talk to me like an equal, Amano-kun. Or rather, I am already speaking in such a casual tone, it would be awkward if you respond with honorifics.”

“Ah, my apologies...”

I apologized on reflex, and then noticed that I almost used honorifics again. Tendo-san smiled wryly.

“I don’t know why, even my classmates use honorifics with me.”

“I-I see.”

“Hmm... That other time, even the teacher spoke to me with honorifics...”

“Haha...”

“In the end, even King Bowser used honorifics on me.”

“Oh... Eh, no no no, that’s too ridiculous!”

“It’s true. When I went into the deepest part of Bowser Castle, he said: ‘I apologize for the terrible road conditions.’ Is it a bug?”

“There should be a limit on how bad a bug affects the game! And under what situation did this bug occur!?”

“Eh... When I feel very sleepy.”

“It’s a dream! There is no doubt that it was a dream!”

“Hmm? Then when Rathian<sup>[3]</sup> told me apologetically: ‘I am very sorry, I don’t have any more scales...’ That was a dream too?”

“It’s probably a dream! It would be terrible if it is not a dream!”

“... Should I ask Capcom about this?”

“Why do you insist on denying that was a dream! Don’t do that! Of course, the one who was mistaken is Tendo-sa--

“... Fufu!”

When Tendo-san suddenly giggled, I finally realized that she drew out my true colours, and felt really embarrassed.

When I became timid again, Tendo-san looked at me as if it was a pity. She seemed embarrassed about chatting further, so she returned to the topic with a gentle smile.

“Sorry, I veered from the topic accidentally. Ehh, where were we...”

Tendo-san looked to the sky with a finger on her lips... She probably became the school idol because she could act this way so naturally.

“Right, we were talking about not advertising for the Gamers Club after founding it, right?”

“Ah, yes, that’s right. Eh... So why...?”

After I had calmed down a little, pure curiosity stemmed from my heart. Tendo-san capped her bottle as she looked at the kids playing in the sandpit.

“Aside from the fact that the Gamers Club doesn’t sound like a proper group, it’s awkward for me to say this myself... Well, because I am in the club, if words are to spread...”

“...? ..... Ah... Ah~~ I see...”

Even though she tailed off the ending of her explanation with a wry smile, I could feel the subtle reason behind that.

Simply put, Tendo-san was probably worried there would be half hearted people who would join in order to slack off or to woo her. After all, unlike sports club, the entry bar for the Gamers club

sounded really low.

Tendo-san continued:

“I really love video games, although I don’t really mention that to my friends. And the reason I am studying in Otobuki High is because I heard we have a famous Gamers Club here.”

“Huh?”

That was the first time I heard that. Tendo-san laughed weakly.

“I heard that the club disbanded right before we entered the school. Most of the members then seemed to have graduated...”

“Okay...”

That was really... how should I put this? But Tendo-san didn’t seem disheartened at all.

“And so, in order to revive the Gamers Club, I have been working behind the scenes for the past year. Finally, I became the Club president this spring...”

“Oh, the Gamers Club has revived? Congratulations.”

I offered my sincere compliments. Tendo-san said shyly: “It isn’t much.”

After a short applause, I thought of a question and asked:

“Eh, but, what exactly does the Gamers Club do...”

“Ah, I know what you are meaning to ask. It is basically what you’d expect at face value, a club to play video games.”

“... Are there any difference between it standing out or not? Actually, how can playing video games be a club activity...”

Tendo-san smiled at my question.

“Ahaha, yes, that’s what people would normally think. However, it really is different from just playing video games. Or rather, we have to play games seriously for it to be a club activity.”

“?”

“Eh... Sorry, it’s hard for you to imagine that right? But that’s how it is.”

Tendo-san stood at this moment, and invited me with a warm smile, with her back to the setting sun:

“Well, Amano-kun! Would you like to visit the Gamers Club room!?”

For an instant, I almost lost myself because of how cute she was, but I still asked her back hurriedly:

“W-Why would you invite someone like me...”

“Why would you say that...?”

Compared to me who couldn’t understand and was flustered--

Tendo-san said in a kind tone as if she was gently guiding a child throwing a tantrum:

“Because you like video games, right?”

“Huh? Ah, yes, I do like them...”

I tilted my head as I pondered, and Tendo-san began explaining in detail.

“Our Gamers Club won’t advertise publicly, and in place, the members have to recruit those who loves gaming. To be honest, the efficiency is bad, and we would most likely miss out on people who truly like games. However, it won’t be worth it if the Club fails because weird people joined in. I think this is a good way of laying a solid foundation.”

“Oh... I see...”

Simply put, this was like a shop that prioritized to serve the customers? The efficiency might be sacrificed, but it gave more importance to other matters.

Hmm? But this means... I really...

“Ah, it’s already so late! My curfew...!”

She had probably set a vibrating alarm on her phone, Tendo-san looked flustered when she took it out from her pocket.

At this day and age, a girl like her still had curfews huh-- While I was feeling impressed, she waved at me and said: “Excuse me!” then picked up her bag from the bench swiftly.

“That’s it for today! Tomorrow! Make some time for me after school tomorrow! I will tell you the details... I will find you after class is over! Bye, Amano-kun!”

“Huh? Ah, alright, eh, b-bye...”

I stood up from the chair hurriedly, and despite a slight hesitation in my heart, I still waved my hand shyly... Even though Tendo-san wasn’t looking at me, I continued waving my hand... I only slumped back onto the bench when I could no longer see her figure anymore.

And after I spaced out for a while... I looked up to the sky and muttered:

“So that means... I... was chosen by her?”

It had nothing to do with romance though. But even so... What was just a delusion suddenly felt very real, there was no doubt about that.

“Gamers Club... Gamers Club huh... Fu, fufu...”

It was the first time in my life--



That I looked forward to going to Otobuki High the next day.

As I absentmindedly cleared my Social Network game missions, I kept replaying back the event from yesterday in my mind.

That's right, Gamers Club. Today... Tendo-san would be inviting me into the Club...

What an exciting day. To think I would see such a day in my high school life.

But... There's something that I felt uneasy about...

Could it be... That was just a dream...?

I didn't feel that way yesterday, but my confidence dwindled after a single night. Being the type whose dreams felt really realistic also helped to grow my unease.

...N-No way, that was definitely not a dream. Yes, it was real, no doubt about it... I-I just need to play my game and wait for school to end, yup!

I focused on the screen of my phone, forcefully wiping away the unease in my heart.

For me, games were a safe haven, and also my mental stabilizing injection. I liked to empty my mind, play task oriented games, and immerse myself in the world of RPG as well. Because no matter what I was playing, I could forget everything about reality, and cleanse my soul completely.

Right now, I was playing one of the many games on the market that was a clone of Puzzle & Dragons<sup>[4]</sup>.

The players had to use the energy that recover over time to adventure, and battle by playing mini games. They could also use the rewards from battles or the bonus from logging in daily to play gacha to collect comrades, power-up and synthesize new items.

I usually couldn't play pay-to-win Social Network Games for long, but this one had a lot of action elements in its battle, which I liked a lot. And so, with a miniscule spending in the range of hundreds of yen, I had been fiddling with this game for half a year.

I completed a mission today as usual, and found a 'help request notification' when I returned to the home screen.

You could request for reinforcement from other players registered as your 'friend' if you couldn't defeat an enemy that appeared during a limited time event, a system to call for aid by sharing the rewards.

Ah, even though the term 'friend' was used, I don't know most of the players, and was only helping out in the game. Just strangers that didn't communicate, and only helped each other for the reward, with no emotional investment.

However, the person requesting aid this time was different.

Ah, it's 'MONO'. I will help him then.

Basically, the rewards for the players who help wasn't too good for this game. It wasn't completely a waste of time, but there were other missions that grant rewards more efficiently.

However, 'MONO' was a 'friend' I made when I first played this game. Even though we didn't message each other at all, I somehow feel a strong sense of camaraderie for him. Our game progress was almost the same and we go online at similar timings, which was probably the reason why we often help each other.

In short, even though this was a meager friendship I had in the Social Network Game, I still want to accept MONO's help request. Especially for this event which had a strict time limit: 'After receiving the help request notification, you have to accept within 3 minutes.'

I immediately reached out to press the 'accept help request' button-

-

“Ah, found you, Amano-kun!”

-- It happened really fast, Tendo-san entered the classroom after speaking loudly.

The appearance of the unexpected person caused an uproar in F class. But Tendo-san seemed used to it, and wasn't concerned as she walked towards me openly.

I froze on the spot as I stared at her with my mobile phone in hand flusteredly,

... As she got closer to me, the gazes from my classmates slowly fell onto me... I could feel my heart beating fast.

Ugh... This really is...

Even though this was a scene I looked forward to in a romantic comedy. I couldn't calm down with so many eyes on me, let alone feeling a sense of superiority about this.

To be honest, instead of being envious, the gaze of my classmates appeared confused.

Maybe Tendo-san didn't understand the awkward atmosphere hanging over us, after coming to my table in quick steps... She suddenly leaned in and peeked at my phone.

“Hmm? Amano-kun, are you busy with something?”

“Ah, just killing time...”

“Oh, a social network game. How unexpected, I didn't think you will play such boring things.”

“Huh?... Ah..... T-That's right, just a little.”

My face started heating up for no reason, and I hurriedly flip my phone over... Why was my body turning hot too? Was it because Tendo-san was beside me, and I was being watched by everyone? Or

perhaps...

“Let’s not talk about that.”

Tendo-san moved the phone I put on the table away, placed her hand there, then spoke to me intimidatingly:

“About the promise today, how about meeting in the library after school? Amano-kun, you can come over immediately after your cleaning duty right?”

“Ah, a-alright. It should be... fine.”

The words were stuck in my mouth and came out haphazardly. It’s probably because I’m being watched by others, so my body was stiffer than yesterday. I had to try expressing myself clearer, so I nodded my head several times like a nodding doll to emphasize what I said.

And so, Tendo-san said with a smile: “It’s settled then!”

It was rare seeing her smile so happily, and she was doing so just for me. This fact caused a disturbance in the class.

I couldn’t find the words to answer her as my mouth opened and close. The gods probably couldn’t bear seeing me like this, and rang the bell for the second period of class.

“Ah, I need to go then. See you after school, Amano-kun!”

Tendo-san left quickly after saying that. The only thing accompanying me was the words ‘Ah, right, bye...’ I uttered in relief, and...

Ugh...

The rude stares from my classmates. Also, as the bell for class just rang, even the classmates that would normally riot didn’t talk to me, and the air felt dangerous. That might be so, but I couldn’t take the initiative and talk about the Gamers Club...

I lowered my head as I reached for the textbook under my desk, and slowly prepare for the next lesson.

-- At this moment...

... Ah, in the end... I didn't accept the help request from MONO...

I picked up my phone and looked at the screen, and the message 'help request fail'.

In reality, it was common when other players couldn't respond to help requests because of various factors. Conversely, there were times when I couldn't get any reinforcement too, and wouldn't hold a grudge against others because of that.

But, why...?

Compared to normal times, the guilt I felt today... Was heavier for some reason.

"Phew... Wahhh~..."

After school, I went to a corner of the sparsely occupied library, and quietly groaned as I stretched my back.

... This is the longest day of my entire high school life...

And of course, it didn't feel long in a good way. I realized once again how mentally taxing it was to endure strange gazes. Well, the game I was playing, the latest release of 'Shiren the Wanderer' I brought to school to play just happened to be saved at the hardest part of the dungeon, level 70. I was grateful that the 'super tension that makes me ignore the outside world completely' accompanied me in taking on this stage of the game! If not, I would have died already.

Games are great! ...Eh, in the end I died to an amateur mistake at level 95, so it was still a setback from another perspective! Damn Chunsoft! Giving the monsters so many annoying skills! Were they geniuses at that!?

After sulking over it for a while, seeing that Tendo-san had still not come to the library, I picked a book at random from the shelf and flipped through it, even though my mind wasn't in it.

But this is weird, it wouldn't be a stretch to call such a situation an extremely lucky romantic comedy development. But I don't feel blissful at all, instead...

When I thought this far, I shook my head. Why was I being such a wimp? The main event was just about to start, right?

I would be visiting the Gamers Club, and would probably join right away. And become good friends with Tendo-san and the members of the Gamers Club.

... After that, my joyous high school life would finally begin. How could I run into a wall like this? I have to pull myself together. Yes, I have to endure even if something unpleasant happens.

As I was renewing my resolve, I could hear the library door open. I put the book back onto the shelf and took a look, and found a blonde girl looking at me with a smile just as expected... She looked out of place no matter where she was as usual, as if she belonged to a higher realm. An existence that was completely the opposite of me... Well, I was out of place here too, in the sense that she was out of my league.

“Amano-kun, you are fast. Sorry, I'm late.”

Tendo-san lowered her voice and came to my side. then I replied with a smile: “Not at all.”

“I just arrived anyway...”

I immediately regretted saying that, as I thought it was too cliché, but... “That's great.” Fortunately, Tendo-san brushed it aside lightly and I patted my chest in relief.

In order to head to the destination, I started walking to the library entrance--



“Ah, please wait. One more person would be coming.”

“... Huh?”

Tendo-san's sudden words made me turn back in surprise. Even though she tilted her head lightly in response, she still explained to me with a smile:

“Ah, didn't I mention it? Before I invited you yesterday, I also found another person. It was a good chance, so I want to invite both of you to a visit.”

“Ah... I-Is that so?”

I walked back to Tendo-san's side with a smile... but my heart was shaken hard.

Finding someone else before me... That means... I... am just a passing thought?

I felt ashamed about thinking that I was a 'chosen one' moments ago. That's too cringey. The only salvation was that I didn't show an arrogant attitude to the people around me. I didn't have friends to show off to anyway...! ...Was that really salvation? Tendo-san and I sat together on a chair near the entrance, and did my best to answer her idle chatter like 'how are you doing?' About 2 minutes later, the library door opened again.

Tendo-san waved when she saw the person entering, calling him over softly.

“Misumi-kun, over here.”

After seeing her reaction, I turned my head to the entrance too. I could hear from the way she was addressing him that the person was a guy, and...

Wahh~~ ... A stylish handsome boy...

My heart fell into a valley. How should I put this? If the one who came was a girl, I might still have a chance. I don't know what kind of chance though. For example... the hope it would become a cliché romantic comedy?

But when things turned out this way, I really felt strongly that I am just a 'complementary item'... Well, that wasn't wrong, I was a background character from the very beginning.

On the other hand, that 'Misumi-kun' was a cheerful handsome boy that didn't seem out of place... In other words, he had the aura of a main character, also...

"Ah, sorry Tendo-san. And you are Amano-kun right? I'm late..."

The apologetic handsome boy lowered his head right after seeing us.

... Uwah, he is bowing really low— He feels like a good person~~  
...Ah, that's right...

I fell into despair in many areas as Tendo-san and I replied in unison: "Not at all."

Tendo-san looked my way again.

"That's right, I mentioned you to Misumi-kun this morning, but the time after class was too short, so I couldn't tell you about Misumi-kun in time."

"Yes, I see..."

As expected, she went to Misumi-kun first, then came to my place...

"Let me introduce again. He is Misumi Eiichi from Class O, in the second year just like us. I saw him playing games in the arcade and chatted him up. He was concentrating hard on playing a tetris-like puzzle game."

Tendo-san's introduction made Misumi-kun blush.

"Eh, don't say that, Tendo-san. It's really embarrassing."

"Why would that be? I am complimenting you. Your skills are shockingly good."

"No, my only forte is in playing that game..."

... Uwah, even the way they met was much better than mine. That's right, the male and female main characters should meet that way, yup.

My eyes had turned gloomy, but the cheerful Misumi-kun still shyly and naturally extended his right hand to me.

"Erm, nice to meet you, Amano-kun. I heard about you from Tendo-san. Well... I actually don't have many friends, I will be very happy if you are willing to be friends with me."

"Ah, a-alright, n-nice to meet you, I am Amano. How do you do!"

He is super cool!

I wasn't used to the action of shaking hands, so I shook back embarrassedly with a red face... Ah, what a smooth hand. His brown hair was smooth too, and what a kind smile... Wait, what was that!? BL? But to be frank, just this part of him already won me over! If I was the main heroine in a love comedy starring Misumi-kun, I would be the type that would fall for him easily, that's how much I admired him!

After I was captured completely, Tendo-san stood up again.

"Alright then, please follow me to the Gamers Club."

When we heard this--

Misumi-kun and I looked at each other's faces... Then I squeezed out a smile a bit too forcefully and said:

“Okay!”

After passing through the corridor from the main school building, the club room of the Gamers Club was located in one of the rooms in the old school building, which housed most of the non-sports clubs.

We were told that the club was located on the third storey and climbed up the stairs, Misumi-kun asked Tendo-san who was walking in front of us:

“By the way, it’s amazing that you got a club room with video games as the core activity. I heard the non-sports club were brutal in their fights over resources...”

I was curious about that too. It might be fine in college, but founding a Gamers Club in high school was something only possible in light novels.

Tendo-san replied without turning back:

“Ah, there are two reasons. Firstly, the Gamers Club existed before we entered the school.”

I didn’t quite understand Tendo-san’s explanation and my gaze went upwards unconsciously... But I almost saw under her skirt for an instant, and averted my eyes while I asked:

“B-But in the first place, how was the past Gamers Club established...?”

“That would be the second reason. In the end, club activities have to be proper.”

“?Proper?”

Misumi-kun and I tilted our heads. W-What was a proper club activities like? Were there a proper or improper way of playing games?

Despite our confusion, Tendo-san simply walked on with no intention of explaining further. After getting to the third storey, we walked on for several more seconds. Misumi-kun couldn't help but try to ask more, but Tendo-san spoke preemptively:

“For that part, I think it is better for you to see for yourselves.”

She suddenly stopped and turned towards us.

Looking closely, there was a door between her and us... The door with the sign ‘Gamers Club’ was right before us.

Tendo-san pushed open the door and entered... She then opened her arms to welcome us, and announced with a refreshing smile:

“Welcome to the Gamers Club!”

The light coming from inside made it hard to see the room clearly.

Despite taking a deep breath, our greetings were nervous, but Misumi-kun still entered the club room first... Not daring to enter first was probably a trademark of me being me.

When Tendo-san closed the door behind us to cut off our retreat, we looked around the club room.

The space was about half a classroom with monitors and games consoles arranged neatly, and their wirings were done perfectly. It was worlds apart from my room where my brother would frequently rage after stepping on a controller.

In the Gamers Club room, there were two other students aside from us.

A male student with narrow eyes under his glasses, giving off a cold impression.

And a brown haired ‘hot babe’ female student who was lazily blowing a bubble gum that was rarely seen in this day and age, as she

fiddled noisily with her personal game joystick for fighting games in silence, focused on her game.

“..... Gulp.”

It was difficult to describe the atmosphere as ‘welcoming’, which made Misumi and I straighten our backs.

Tendo-san eased the mood a little frantically.

“Ah, eh~~ I am sorry. Including me, there are five members in the Gamers Club right now, but I don’t know why only the two people who are hard to get along with are here...”

The intelligent looking male student heard what Tendo-san said, and crossed his arms unhappily and pushed his glasses.

“Hmmp, what an impolite junior. Did I ever treat someone I just met strictly?”

“No no no, Kase-Senpai is just strict to everyone. That is stringent enough for a first impression.”

She might be saying that, but Tendo-san was really at ease towards the Sempai. Was this the relationship between clubmates? While I was feeling envious, the other student who looked like a delinquent appeared to have finished a fighting game match, and glanced our way. She then said with a fierce look:

“... Ah~ hello.”

“H-Hello...”

Misumi-kun and I bowed and parroted her words. The female student look at us with sleepy eyes, and asked directly:

“Are you good with fighting games?”

“Huh...”

Who was she asking? We didn't know, but Misumi-kun and I both shook our heads. And so, she obviously lost interest with an 'Oh', spat her bubble gum onto the paper packaging, then placed a new gum into her mouth immediately. She then returned her gaze to the screen... Eh...

"Ah, sorry. Nina-Senpai is always like this, please don't mind."

"... Oh."

We answered Tendo-san blankly. This person was a grade our senior too. Indeed, from her outstanding figure and charm from her lazy attitude, she felt like a person that wasn't our age.

Tendo-san gently introduced them once again to the two of us who were intimidated:

"Ah, let me reintroduce. That person wearing glasses and acting cool is the club vice president, Kase Gakuto-Senpai."

"Hey, Tendo."

Even though we were intimidated by how Kase-senpai was obviously enraged, Tendo-san was unfazed and continued:

"And the person playing fighting games over there... Or rather the 'hot babe' big sister who always plays fighting games is Oiso Nina-Senpai."

"....."

"As you can see, Senpai ignores people when she is playing fighting games, just like that."

Even though she was being introduced, not only did blah Senpai ignored us, she didn't even glance at Tendo-san... What amazing focus.

Heeding Tendo-san's words, we sat down. Two long white tables



were placed together in the middle of the room, with blah Senpai sitting to the right front seat with a screen before her and her personal joystick in hand. Kase-Senpai who was opposite her wasn't doing anything, simply watching as if he was appraising us.

Misumi-kun and I sat together at the bottom seats with our backs to the entrance. Tendo-san who was seated beside Oiso-Senpai led the conversation with a "So..."

"I wish to invite the two of you to watch our club activities... Kase-Senpai, please don't sulk there, play some FPS casually like you usually do."

"Hey Tendo. I have never played FPS with a casual attitude since I was born..."

"Ah~~ alright, got it. Here Senpai, I am plugging the console in."

Tendo made her way to the top seat side, and plugged in the power for the largest screen and a game console. She started the game, then hand the wireless controller to Kase-Senpai.

Even though the Senpai snorted, he didn't hesitate in taking the controller and called out to the seat opposite him: "Oiso."

The female upperclassman took out headphones from somewhere and plugged it into the monitor connected to her fighting game console. Seemed like the people playing on the main screen had priority in audio entertainment.

When Tendo-san returned to her seat, Kase-Senpai activated the game software and deftly chose online battle from the menu. He then waited for the matchmaking to be done. It was the latest installment of a famous FPS (First Person Shooter) game series I had dabbled in. The player would become a soldier in a real battlefield, and shoot at each other with the most advanced guns... The description might sound bloody, but players would be revived immediately after death, and the kill scenes were downplayed, so the feel of the game was like an advanced version of snowball fights.

After the numbers were set and the fight started, Misumi-kun heaved in admiration:

“Woah~~ the graphics in games are really advanced nowadays.”

It was true that the graphics was really well done among FPS games... But for a game lover, I was surprised by how moved he was.

Tendo-san asked:

“Misumi-kun... could it be you have not tried other games other than that puzzle game?”

In response, Misumi-kun scratched his head troublingly.

“Didn’t I mention it before? I have a game console at home... But I would only consider playing when there is a new Dragon Quest or Mario game.”

“I-I see.”

Tendo-san probably thought he would be more familiar with games, and smiled wryly.

“... Hmmp.”

Kase-Senpai snorted as he fiddled with his controller. Misumi-san felt a little guilty and turned timid... Eh~~

“T-The graphics in this game is awesome! A-And Kase-Senpai’s skills are great!”

I pushed myself to speak in order to lighten the mood, but my voice was obviously shrilled, so it wasn’t done too well.

Despite that, Misumi-kun still smiled at me in relief... T-That’s great.

“Kase-Senpai might look like this, but he is actually an elite who made it onto the ranking board of Japan.”

“What do you mean ‘look like this’? What do I look like?”

Kase-Senpai protested as he blew off the head of the enemy he encountered splendidly. We weren’t familiar with FPS, but we could still tell his skills were top notch.

Kase-Senpai didn’t think much of it as he defeated the opposing team one by one.

I gasped.

I remember this series... the review says it’s a game where players dish out and take damage really fast right? But... After going through such intense battles, he didn’t even die once?

Anyone who tried this game series before would be able to tell how out of place that was. No, when I glanced to the side, I noticed that Misumi-kun was also staring at the screen. That’s how overwhelming Kase-Senpai’s technique was.

Tendo-san muttered while watching the screen:

“So, do you understand the Gamers Club better now?”

Misumi-kun and I both nodded after hearing that... I could feel subtly what she meant by ‘club activities have to be proper’.

As Kase-Sempai started the second round silently, Tendo-san continued:

“Not just FPS. For example, for Nina-Senpai...”

“.....!”

Tendo-san turned the monitor in front of Oiso-Senpai towards us a little. Oiso-Sempai was shaken for an instant, but she clicked her tongue and --

“Hmm...”

She couldn't see the screen properly from such an angle, but Senpai's character was doing just fine, and could even dominate her opponent who had great win-lose ratings.

Tendo-san turned the monitor backed towards Oiso-Sempai with a smile on her face.

"The other members aren't no-lifers like these two, but they could still perform at similar level in their own expertise. In other words..."

"... I understand. You mean they have all gotten achievements for the club."

Tendo-san smiled to answer Misumi-kun muttering, effectively saying: "Bingo."

"A competition in real life is a given, it's the same for online competition too. Also, because the previous principal held the concept of 'rewarding those with merits', the previous Gamers Club was established successfully. Founding it this time was done mostly by imitating the previous generation."

"I see..."

I mumbled. When I heard the name Gamers Club, I was wondering why such a club that focus on entertainment was approved, but this was really 'club activities'... But that means...

The three of us observed Kase-Senpai's massacre for a while more. After the second round was done, Tendo-san led the conversation with a "Well then,"

"There's no point in watching right? Please try it out too."

"Huh?"

The sudden suggestion stunned Misumi-kun and me. Surprisingly, even Kase-Senpai also expressed his interest: "That's true."

Tendo-san took two portable game consoles from somewhere and proffered them to Misumi-kun and me.

“We have the portable version of that game series, just one game cartridge would allow multiple players to play against each other.”

“I-I see...”

I turned on the portable game console and adjusted the settings nervously. However, Misumi-kun beside me wasn't familiar with it and took some time to do so. I told him 'Lend me that for a moment' and helped him finish the settings.

“Thank you, Amano-kun. You are knowledgeable with games, that's amazing.”

“Ah, not really...:

I returned the configured console back to him bashfully.

At this moment, Kase-Senpai turned his gaze to me and said: “The guy over there seemed to have somewhat dabbled in this.”

I straightened my back nervously and answered: “Yes!”

“Well, I play... played this game franchise a little...”

“Oh, then show me what you got.”

Senpai's glasses lighted up. I stammered: “P-P-Please show mercy...” Then look down at the screen of my console.

The rules of the game was a little special. There were four players, but there were also eight computer controlled bots, simulating a twelve player game. Kase-Senpai also quietly raised the difficulty of the bots to the highest. The serious atmosphere was making me pale, but Misumi-kun didn't seem to notice. Tendo was even giggling mischievously.

With all sorts of emotions brewing underneath, the first ten minute

round began.

And the result was--

“... Kase-Senpai, please be more considerate of them.”

The match ended in no time, and Tendo-san lift her head from the screen dumbfounded... As expected, Misumi-kun and I died numerous times terribly. Our ranking from the top was Kase-Senpai, Tendo-san, me and then Misumi-kun. But the gap between Tendo-san and I was ridiculous, and I was about even with Misumi-kun. Misumi-kun was falling into depression beside me.

To ease the mood, I said hurriedly:

“B-But Kase-Senpai is really good! The bots are strong, but you can wipe them out as if they were trash! A-Also, playing this game with four players is really interesting--”

“Another round.”

“Hmm?”

Kase-Senpai cut me off. He didn't look away from the screen and continued:

“Another round. Get ready.”

“Huh? Ah, o-okay...”

I looked at my console screen quickly. As it was still loading, I looked around me with a smile... However, Tendo-san and Misumi-kun were both staring seriously at their screens too.

Feeling ashamed, I also looked down on mine.

And so, round two started.

And the results--

“That... That’s strange?”

As for the rankings, Kase-Sempai and Tendo-san still won convincingly... But I lost to Misumi-kun a little... That’s strange?

I raised my face from the screen and smiled at Misumi-kun.

“Y-You are amazing! Did you played this before?”

Misumi-kun raised his head from his screen after hearing my question:

“Huh? No, I really didn’t know about this before... But after playing, it feels really deep.”

“Hmm? Ah, I-I see. Yes, that’s right, it’s fun playing together with everyone--”

“Another.”

Kase-Senpai cut me off again. Since this wasn’t a FPS play trial, but to see the environment of the Gamers Club as a whole, I felt it was time to do something else and looked around... But Tendo-san and Misumi-kun was looking at their gaming screen seriously once again.

I had no choice but to mimic them, and play the game silently.

After the third match was over, the result was...

“... Hmm...”

Kase-Senpai was still first... But Misumi-kun’s score was really close to Tendo-san who was in second. At this point, Kase-Senpai finally lifted his head and smiled coldly for the first time at Misumi-kun.

“You got some skills. What’s your name?”

“Ah, I’m Misumi.”

“Misumi, you have potential. Although your controls were stiff in

the beginning... you gradually learn techniques and is getting better the more you play.”

Misumi-kun scratch his head shyly because of Kase-Senpai’s compliments.

“No, I’m just lucky. I was just referencing Senpai’s movements...”

“That’s it.”

It was rare hearing Kase-Senpai sounding a little passionate.

“The effort in stealing techniques from others, your attitude and observation skills, these are qualities in order to improve in games. And Misumi’s quality in these are high in standard.”

“Eh, not really...”

Misumi humbly scratched his head, but Tendo-san also praised him.

“No, you are really amazing, Misumi-kun! I played this game for quite a while, and you have almost caught up to me! Misumi-kun, you are very talented. Ah, maybe that puzzle game helped nurture your concentration and thinking skills?”

They surrounded Misumi-kun and discussed excitedly. Looking at this scene... Well, I felt somewhat vexed and envious after losing, but I still thought naively that Misumi-kun was really amazing as I looked at them while dazing off. In this world, there were people who possess such talents. Yes, he was really strong.

-- At this moment, Kase-Senpai turned to me suddenly... and glared at me unhappily. I didn’t know what’s the matter and my shoulders trembled from fear. He then pushed his glasses and showered me with sharp criticism.

“Compared to him, what’s with you? You played this game before and remembered the basic controls... But I couldn’t see any



improvement in these three matches. Not just that, your performance dropped towards the end, right?”

“Ah... Eh... Sorry...”

I didn’t expect to be lectured and just answered stiffly. But that seemed to enrage Kase-Senpai even more, he even ignored Tendo-san who tried to soothe him by saying “It’s fine, that should be enough”, and continued lecturing me.

“Also, you climbed on top of the vehicles in the center of the map and jumped around that one time. Why did you do that?”

“Hmm? Senpai is saying...”

I searched my memory to see if I did that... Ah~~ I did.

“Ah, because if I climb higher from there, I think I can catch an amazing view, so I tried jumping... And the scenery was awesome!... Well, I was shot immediately after that.”

After hearing my answer, not just Kase-Senpai, even Tendo-san sighed softly. When Misumi-kun also smiled awkwardly, I tilted my head, not really sure why I was lectured.

“Well... Ah, sorry, I didn’t play that seriously. Well, it is fun playing with everyone--”

“Never mind that. Or rather, you saw how I play right? Didn’t you think about learning from that? Just what are you thinking about when you watched me?”

To me, these were still baffling questions. Not knowing what kind of mine I tripped off, I answered timidly:

“Huh? Well... What I have in mind... That... I felt impressed thinking ‘great skills’ and ‘amazing’, and was having a blast watching... But... Ah, I like to watch clips of highly skilled players--”

“... Hmmp.”

Kase-Senpai smirked while I was still talking, then turned his eyes away from me as if he had lost interest.

With the awkward atmosphere in the room... Tendo-san wanted to restart the session and said loudly:

“O-Okay!”

“The Gamers Club doesn’t just play FPS! Next... that’s right, let’s play an action game, action game! Okay, Nina-Senpai, it’s your turn!”

“Hmmm? Ah... Wait a moment...”

Oiso-Senpai who was called took off her headphones and hung it on her neck as she swiftly finish off her opponent. After ending the game, Senpai grunted and used her gaze to urge Kase-Senpai to switch places with her. She probably wanted to play on the main monitor together with us.

After changing seats, Kase-Senpai continued playing FPS alone. Tendo-san then went to the top seat area to choose a game.

“Well~~ ... Right... Fighting games require skill... That would be a little...”

Was she referring to me when she said ‘that would be a little’...? My mood sunk a little.

Misumi agreed, probably out of goodwill: “I think something relaxing would be great.” Ah... Misumi-kun was a nice guy and talented in gaming. How respectable.

Tendo-san deliberated a while, chose a game and then said: “Ah, this one is good.” before putting the disk into the game console. She handed the wireless controller to Oiso-Senpai, me and Misumi-kun, then returned to her seat with a controller in hand.

After starting the game, the title screen appeared on the screen.

“Ah, I played this before. It’s interesting, everyone had a riot playing it.”

Misumi-kun smiled. It was true, this was a really famous battle action game. It was fundamentally a fighting game, but it allowed four players to compete at the same time, and contain a variety of stage gimmicks, and you can turn things around by pure luck in getting powerful items. It was the type of game where the skills of the players won’t matter too much. Speaking of which, I like this game too, and would play with my brother at home occasionally.

“Ehh~~ ... Alright, it’s fine playing this once in awhile.”

Oiso-Senpai was the only one who seemed a little reluctant, but she wasn’t very against it.

And so, we started playing with a relaxed mood.

It was true that the first match started in a peaceful atmosphere. The difference in player skills were probably too wide, even though luck play an important part, Oiso-Senpai still took the lead. The twist and turn in the match really suited the style of the game, and it felt really interesting.

However, something was strange during the character selection screen of the second match.

“Huh? Everyone... is not changing your character?”

One of the selling point of this game was the large ensemble of playable characters. When I play with my brother, we would switch characters after every match naturally, and would even let the computer pick one at random. But... Aside from me, the three other people didn’t switch characters.

As I was sitting there dazed, Tendo-san replied with a wry smile:

“Ah, because that’s the character I specialized in.”

“Oh... I see.”

Well, it was normal to have a character you specialized in for fighting games... Eh~~...? I still had doubts and looked towards Misumi-kun, who smiled shyly:

“Ah, I’m a beginner, so I want to familiarize myself with each character.”

“Oh... I-I see.”

I could understand his reasoning. Yes, very traditional. However...

I looked at Oiso-Senpai, who said lazily:

“Because I am the weakest in this character.”

“Hmm? You mean... Ah, you are giving us a handicap...”

“Maybe a little. But I’m doing it mostly to get better at this character, so don’t mind me.”

“Hmm... Ah, okay... I understand...”

Yup, I was grateful for Senpai’s good will. On top of that, she still want to train in such a situation, she was really a model gamer... Yes...

Despite the knot I felt in my heart, I still finished the second and third match. Oiso-Senpai secured first place convincingly, the other places weren’t fixed because of the element of luck, and the results were basically a tie. However...

“Wah! ...Ugh, that’s sly, Misumi-kun! Tendo-san is fast! And Oiso-Senpai is really skilled!”

"....."

I was the only one who would make such exaggerated reactions, the other players just focus on the screen... Everyone were smiling, and no one was unhappy...

After four or five consecutive rounds, everyone still didn't change characters, only I was choosing a different character every time.

That was probably why I would be at a disadvantage when the match start, as I wasn't familiar with the control.

Oiso-Senpai glanced at me and said:

"... Eh, how about concentrating on one character? The one at that corner is strong and easy to use."

"Hmm? Ah, alright. Thank you Sempai. I will use it this time!"

I replied with a smile to Senpai's recommendation. But she seemed troubled for some reason.

"... This time?"

"Huh? Ah, sorry, well, I want to try the other characters too..."

"... Alright."

Oiso-Senpai who seemed to have lost interest in me turned back to the screen... Eh, was I too rude to Senpai just now? Should I keep using the character she recommended? However...

I played a few more match with the knot in my heart. The matches were short, so the pace was fast. However...

Everyone... kept using the same character...

To be frank, the matches were turning dull.

Also... I am the only one making an effort to get the items?

When I realized it, everyone including Misumi-kun was fighting a

melee battle seriously, I was the only one wandering the field for items. Even if I obtain a powerful item, I would feel bad about it when the three of them were fighting so seriously.

In the end, my ranking in the matches were average, with mediocre performance, with results right in the middle.

We had ten such matches. Tendo-san then looked at the clock and made an ‘Uwah’ sound before stopping the game.

“We played a bit too long. Alright, it’s finished! Good work everyone~~”

When we heard what she said, we responded with: “Thank you for your hard work~~” Unlike the FPS game, the ending was harmonious... However, for some reason, the knot I felt in my heart... No... It’s probably because my feelings were too plain... Yup.

And so, Oiso-Senpai played another fighting game on the main screen while Tendo-san chatted with us idly, which probably serve as a means to rest our eyes.

“That’s right, was there any reason why the two of you came into contact with video games?”

When we were asked this, Misumi-kun and I looked at each other. We both wanted to let the other party go first, but Tendo-san probably couldn’t stand it and said:

“For me, I had an Onee-san who loves video games who lived near my place, I was probably influenced by her. When I was young, I was pretty bothered by my hair colour, and spent most of my time playing at home. Back then, that Onee-san would accompany me gently.”

“Oh, I see.”

As we listened to this heartwarming story, Tendo-san’s face suddenly turned gloomy and she said:

“But that person’s gaming skill was ridiculously good, and she refused to give me any handicap. When I realized it... I had become a kid who was as strong as a demon in all sorts of games...”

“I-Is that so...”

To think the topic changed in such a way which made it hard to comment on.

“After she moved away, I spent less time playing games, and my skill had fallen from my peak a little... But even so, I still retain my passion for video games. That’s why, my wish right now is to have a match with the Gamers Club from the high school that Onee-san went to... Hekiyou Academy, and defeat them.”

“Y-Your gaming background is really dramatic...”

As I was feeling shocked by Tendo-san’s back story, she made an “Ara” sound, as if she was being teased.

“My story is the plainest. For example... Kase-Senpai over there had been trained by his legendary mercenary father since birth, which laid the foundation for his demon like skills.”

“Huhh!”

Misumi-kun and I were both shocked, but Kase-Senpai just pushed his glasses in response... He didn’t retort, which meant... It was true!

“Also, Nina-Senpai set a very high target for herself in order to get her good friend who was completely engrossed in fighting games out of the dark side.”

“Are you serious!?”

Misumi-kun and I were both stunned, and the subject Oiso-Senpai herself said: “Yes, it’s completely true~~” Her casual tone made me feel weak... Which seemed more convincing that way...

Tendo-san continued:

“By the way, for the two absent members, one claimed: ‘I am a princess from an RPG like world, so I should play RPG and receive the blessings of RPG’, a girl with unfathomable thoughts: The other had her family heirloom stolen, and entered the video game world to follow the lead that the culprit is a ‘professional video gamer’. A girl with a heavy duty on her shoulders...”

“What kind of Gamers Club is this!?”

When I heard that, our plain experience was not even worth a mention.

However, Tendo-san was urging with a smiling face, so we couldn’t run away.

Even my gaze lost to Misumi-kun, so I had to talk about my own experience.

“Well... I don’t have any reasons... I just... Like playing video games...”

That completely spoiled the mood, and it lingered in the air. Even though I thought that I screwed up... But my love for games was real, so I added:

“Eh... Liking something without any special reason... Is that no good?”

“No... Not at all... Yes, I remember that Onee-san said that--”

Tendo-san looked into the air nostalgically. And so, seeing the chance to end my round, I elbowed Misumi-kun lightly, urging him to introduce his experience. Misumi started solemnly:

“My situation is very common...”

Misumi had no choice but to say it. Alright, there would be another



story on the same level of my--

“I have amnesia, and the only thing I am good at is that puzzle game...”

“Traitor-----!”

I yelled. After showing a surprised face, he started telling us the details.

“I don’t have any memory of the past three years. When I realized it, I was already playing that puzzle game. After a series of events, I was adopted into the Misumi family, and live together with my foster parents and little sister. At the same time, I am still focusing on playing that puzzle game.”

"....."

The amazingly strong story made us speechless. Misumi-kun smiled shyly, and passed the baton back to Tendo-san... But Tendo-san was troubled to take over at such a moment.

She was lost for a moment, and then cleared her throat... She skipped the topic to conclude today’s visit.

“A-Alright, so you get the gist of what the Gamers Club’s activities are?”

“Yes.”

Misumi-kun and I answered in unison. Tendo-san nodded satisfactorily and carried on:

“Ah, also, our upperclassmen are completely not suitable for leading club activities, they are the type of no-lifers whose social skills missed the mark. But you can hold some expectations for the other members.”

"Hey~~"

The two upperclassmen who kept their eyes glued to the screen protested. Misumi-kun and I couldn't help laughing, and the gentle faces of the Senpai-tachi filled the room with a peaceful air... As expected of the school idol Tendo Karen, her choice of words was excellent. She continued with a heartwarming smile on her face:

“There are no hard and fast rule that you have to improve your gaming skills. In fact, I am not that skilled too. The other two members are first years with lots of space to grow, and they are both cute girls. But they are really gutsy.”

I reacted immediately to these information. The Gamers Club where all the members including Tendo-san were cute... Was this some sort of VIP area? A new type of Dream C Club?

As I indulge in my delusion, Tendo-san continued:

“But since we are playing, sparring with each other to raise our skills should be the direction the Gamers Club should take as a group. Well then, that's what I think about when leading the club activities...”

Tendo-san ended the topic, and showed a dazzling smile.

“It would be wonderful if the two of you could join us.”

I already had the intention of answering “Yes” and entering the club. And Misumi answered easily: “Okay, I had fun playing today, please let me join.”

... Was this the ability of popular main characters? So decisive and straightforward.

Tendo-san was elated over his reply, and faced me with that smile too.

“What about you, Amano-kun? Will you participate in the Gamers Club activities with me?”

The power of Tendo's upward looking gaze was showing its effect... My mental endurance was at its limits. My face was completely red, and it was a miracle that my nose wasn't bleeding.

I looked to the side sharply, and saw Misumi-kun looking at me with a smile full of anticipation. Not just that, even the picky Kase-Senpai and Oiso-Senpai was looking at me with gentle eyes, as if they were saying: "It's a good chance, so just join us."

I thought they were scary at the beginning, but the Senpai-tachi were actually good people, they were willing to accept a hopeless player like me... I was very grateful.

I looked around the Gamers Club once again.

The games I loved the most filled this ideal space.

A school idol I admired was inviting me.

There was a cheerful youth my age who I rather like, and feel that we would become fast friends in no time.

There were Senpai-tachi worthy of respects, and two female junior members I had not met.

The normie life that I always dreamed about was all right here.

If I say 'yes' right now, I would be able to grasp all these in my hands.

... It was like a dream.

Running into such a situation was like a once in a lifetime surprise the gods bestowed to a background character like me.

That was why, I...

Facing her... After interacting with her directly, I started to fall for her for real, and it wouldn't be too much for me to say shamelessly that the blonde beauty was my first crush.

I smiled from the bottom of my heart.

With a determined heart.

I told her the answer I had.

“No, it’s fine. Because there isn’t any ‘game’ I want to play in this club.”

"I am really an idiot ahhhhhhh!"

The next morning after visiting the club. I sprawled over my table right after reaching school. Ignoring the curious eyes of my classmates, I grabbed my head in deep regret.

Why! Why did I reject her!? Am I retarded? Do I want to die? Was I so vexed after losing to Misumi-kun in a game? Or angry because of Kase-senpai’s accusation!? Depressed because Oiso-senpai is disinterested in me!? Huh, did I reject such a dream like invitation for my cheap pride!? I should just die! The me from yesterday should just die! What is this!? Pretending to be retarded? That’s right, I was just pretending to be retarded!

I didn’t sleep well last night as I repeated my self loath for god knows how many times.

The truth was, I still didn’t completely understand how I felt back then.

I didn’t take out the textbook and notebook, and just kept struggling on the table.

I remembered that I answered that with some weird belief, but I couldn’t remember what the content of that crucial belief is! Or the concept couldn’t be expressed in words! No no no, how could I reject with such a reason!? Idiot! What am I doing!? Am I pretending to be the hero who rejected the invitation of the dragon king in Dragon Quest!? My sensitivity is too game like! Like some sort of late stage disease! Sigh, enough already...

No, I wasn't able to stop cursing myself. This might lead to me hurting myself. I had to calm down first. Right, I should play games at a time like this...

After gathering my thoughts, I took out my phone under the watchful gaze of my classmates, and started playing my usual social network game.

When I was about to clear one mission, I had calmed down a little.

I need to be calm... Wait, there is still hope right? It will be fine, I can just apply to enter the Gamers Club again. Even though that's really shameful... But even so, there is still a way to salvage this. I just need to say that I wasn't emotionally ready yesterday, and everything will be fine right? Yup.

I then relaxed. Eh, to be frank... There should be a limit to how low one could go. But this was a crucial moment that would decide if I could live like a normie, not the time to be concerned about these.

I cleared another mission while I was contemplating.

An even better situation would be... for the other party to invite me again, yup. That's right, maybe Misumi-kun will come invite me! Yes!

Even though I knew I was deluding in a way that was convenient for me, I couldn't keep it together if I don't do that.

I continued fiddling with my phone as I deluded further. At this moment--

Ah, MONO sent another help request. I didn't aid him yesterday, and the event period is almost over, I have to help him--

I was about to hit the 'accept help request' button when at that instant...

As the class was getting rowdy, I looked at the classroom

entrance... And found Tendo-san's usual smiling and graceful figure.

I gulped. Tendo-san entered the classroom unfazed like yesterday, and walked towards my seat. The gazes of my classmates followed her closely.

As I held my phone motionlessly, Tendo-san came to my desk, and said almost the same words as yesterday.

“Good morning, Amano-kun. Are you busy with something?”

“Huh? Eh~~... I am just playing games on my phone...”

“Oh-- you really like such boring things.”

“Erm... Ah, t-that's right...”

I forcefully averted my gaze, but my personality of being intrigued on the topic of games made me blabber.

“Ah, this game's design isn't bad. Tendo-san, I think you will find it interesting if you play it--”

“Let's not talk about that.”

Tendo-san ignored the screen on my phone that I was showing her, and leaned in... So close! Her face was closer than yesterday, so close that everyone in class became noisy at that instant.

Tendo-san's long lashes, high nasal bridge, soft lips and delicate skin. And also... her big clear eyes. These all entered my vision in a close up shot, making my pulse race.

She showed a smile as charming as an angel, then told me with a gentle and well meaning tone:

“Amano-kun, join our club alright? Please, I am very interested in you.”

“Huh...”

Her invitation... surpassed all the 'return to the Gamers Club delusion' I made up in my mind. It was too ideal, and even had the 'very interested' speech by Tendo-san in it. In fact, my classmates also heard that, and the commotion was louder than ever. And it wasn't just occasional subdued outburst, but close to screams. This might be a rare chance for me to elevate my status in class.

With all the conditions laid out, what was there to hesitate about?

Tendo-san moved her face away a little and extended her right hand, as if she was asking me to shake hands.

... Oh no, I was on the verge of tears.

In my eyes, Tendo-san was like Buddha who was lowering the spider web <sup>[5]</sup> to save Kandata. It's true, I could see the halo behind her. What a merciful person. She offered me another chance... To a foolish background character like me.

I switched the phone to my left hand, and then slowly extended my right towards her... I didn't reached out quickly simply because I was shy, and a corner of my heart was still lingering over what the 'belief' in my heart yesterday was.

However... Since I couldn't recall it, it was probably not important.

Despite hesitating for a moment, I steeled my heart and reach for her hand--

'MONO's help request: five seconds remaining.'

-- I didn't take her hand, but pressed the 'accept help request' button on my phone instead... Phew, that was close. It was fine now. It would be fine to press pause on the battle for now--

"....."

"..... Ah."

When I came to my senses, I had already did something unbelievably rude... Even Tendo-san who was extending her hand was smiling stiffly. Under the gaze of the classmates who didn't know what was happening, Tendo-san forced a smile and asked:

“A... Amano-kun? Could it be... That boring social network game is more important than my invitation?”

“Huh? Ah, no, sorry! I am very sorry, we were in the middle of a conversation! That was really rude of me! I am really sorry! I apologize for that! Like this!”

I lowered my head in apology hurriedly... but, how should I say this?

Unfortunately, I remembered my feelings yesterday because of our conversation just now.

... Sigh... No other way about this. Yes, I remembered, it couldn't be helped.

I lift my head and showed a broad smile... This time, I didn't stammer when I talked to Tendo-san.

“However, Tendo-san... Even though they are boring to you, they are meaningful to me.”

“!”

“So, I will apologize to you about the Gamers Club. I still won't be joining the Gamers Club.”

“! But... But... Why?”

Tendou-san's smile became stiffer. Even though it breaks my heart... I still can't give in on this, and replied with a smile.

“Like I said yesterday, there isn't any ‘game’ I want to play there.”

“So I'm asking you--!”



Tendo-san raised her voice, then cautiously lowered it again.

-- That's why I am asking you, what does that mean?"

"It means... Sorry, even though you are asking, I am not too sure myself."

"... Are you worried about your gaming skills? Don't worry, Kase-senpai might look that way, but he is unexpectedly caring--"

"Ah, No, no! Not that... Eh~~ Well, to be honest, it is true my confidence in my gaming skills got shattered. But... That's not the reason."

"If not... Then what is the issue..."

Tendo-san's face was like that of a lost sheep... I never thought that I would ever see the confident her show such an expression... Ah, was it because of the haphazard way of expressing my opinion?

Although I was smiling awkwardly, I was still in thought for a while, and tried to answer by expressing what I could right now.

"I don't think there is anything wrong with the Gamers Club. Or rather, I think everyone in it is very respectable. All of them are shining so brilliantly. From the bottom of my heart, I feel that the Gamers Club was like the Baseball Club, Soccer Club and the other sports club, worthy of the status of 'proper club activities'."

"That's right. Everyone training hard together to aim for a higher goal. That is the right way to approach gaming right?"

"Yes, that's true. Improving oneself through hard work will let you experience the true joy in gaming... I think, you can achieve that result in your Gamers Club."

"S-Since you understand, then let's join the Gamers Club together..."

Tendo-san looked at me as if she was looking for support... But why did she want to invite me so badly? Someone like me wasn't valuable at all.

And so, even though her sincere invitation made my heart ache... Even so, for the ideal I refused to give in... I showed her the screen on my phone, and expressed my feelings completely honestly.

"But I am sorry. I still prefer to play games happily... It seems impossible to do that in the Gamers Club where we spar and train with each other."

"! I really... don't understand... Didn't you just say that training is the right way..."

"Ah, yes, that's why I wholly acknowledge that way of enjoying the game."

"... Then..."

Tendo-san reacted as if she completely didn't understand. I grabbed my shoulders and groaned as I sought out a way to express myself in an easier to understand way.

"Eh, that... Right, I have a very cool and excellent little brother."

"..... What?"

Tendo-san turned stiff. To be frank, her eyes started to show the emotions of being dumbfounded. But even so... I still struggled to convey my messy thoughts to her.

"Actually, I don't have much interest in common with my brother, and didn't talk much. Think about it, I am so incompetent, and couldn't do something that showed the dignity of a big brother... H-However, you might laugh at this, when the two of us play video games together, we could laugh like idiots happily... Even if we encounter anything unhappy in school... That doesn't change."

"....."

"And so, Tendo-san, video games to me... Well... I know that my attitude towards gaming would be lectured by you, Kase-senpai or Oiso-senpai, and is not anything worth complimenting... However, I still treat it as my safe harbour, something I can find comfort in, a medium for a bum like me to use to interact with others... That's why I hope to keep video games as something that would give salvation to my soul... keeping the most important 'entertainment' effect of it."

"....."

"Ah~~... T-Think about it, just like a player whose goal is to make it into Kōshien or turn pro, and another who just wanted to vent their stress in the baseball batting cage... like the difference between them?"

"....."

Oh no. Was my language skill too lousy?

I cleared my throat to redo it, deciding to tell her the conclusion.

"Well, anyway, what I wanted to say is, I'm sorry, Tendo-san. The Gamers Club is wonderful... But I won't be joining. Because I want to play video games in my own way in the future too. Ah, but I am very very happy that you invited me! Thank you!"

I expressed my gratitude with a smile, but Tendo-san's reaction... For some reason, she was looking down and trembling... She seem to be muttering something.

"~~! ~~Ugh~~! Why... Why does it feel like I am being dumped...! I never... thought that... I would be rejected by someone like... Amano-kun...! For that to actually happen..."

"T-Tendo-san? S-Sorry, someone like me rejecting your invitation..."

The moment I spoke, Tendo-san lifted her head as if she came to

her senses. For some reason, her face was red.

“I-I’m not being tsundere...! T-That’s right, s-since you prefer that, I-I don’t... mind at all. And also... someone like you... I won’t... A- Anyway, your skills are bad, playing games with you is... is not interesting...”

With her arms crossed, Tendo-san averted her eyes as she complained to me quietly.

In response-- I showed the smallfolk smile I was good at and agreed with her.

“Ah, that’s true. Well... But I think you have a talent for video games! So please continue working hard on the club! I will support you all from behind! Ah, Misumi-kun joined the club, with such a promising member like him, the club will be fine even without me!”

“...Ugh! Yes, you are right!”

The next instant, Tendo-san suddenly slammed on my table with a ‘bang!’ Her face was completely red as she glared at me grudgingly with tears in her eyes... T-That’s strange?



She then turned, flicked her long blonde hair to the side... Then left in crude steps, completely unlike how she came into our classroom.

“.....”

Tendo-san left the classroom and left everyone dumbfounded. After a few seconds, there was a commotion in class as all my classmate seemed to snap out of it.

“Huh? What happened? This is the first time I see Tendo-san making such a vexed face...”

“Yeah, that was definitely emotional conflict!”

“No, they were talking about club activities or something... Anyway, why don’t someone ask Amano.”

“I-It’s hard to ask the subject directly right now. And he seemed so mysterious recently...”

“Amano had a strange aura about him these few days.”

I seemed to have become the subject of their discussion... Since I could hear all that, did that mean everyone didn’t care whether I heard them or not...?

I sighed deeply and looked out the window. The branches of the birch tree swayed wildly with the wind.

... Sigh... Not only did I reject joining the Gamers Club... I even made Tendo-san so mad... Just what am I doing...

The route to a wonderful high school life crumbled. In such a situation, I would have no one to blame if Tendo-san’s fans find trouble with me. Why did things turn out like this?

... Looks like... I made the wrong choice. That’s definitely it...

I also played some galgames, but why didn’t I gain any experience points from that? Well, that’s how playing games were, it was useless

even if you play a lot. But that was why...

After sulking for a while, I decided to use the time before the bell for class ring to complete MONO's help request mission.

I worked hard to defeat the unexpectedly tough enemy, reaped the miniscule rewards and then switch off the screen for a while to rest... Sigh.

Now that I think about it... I prioritized this reward over Tendo-san, right?

.....

Oh no, I am getting depressed. Now I get it. After an hour, I will definitely return to how I was before. I would keep thinking about joining the Gamers Club, and regret tremendously--

"Boo boo!"

"?"

-- As I was thinking about that, my phone suddenly vibrated.

I thought it should be the notification of an app update and unlocked the screen. But it was displaying something I didn't expect... A message from the Social Network Game.

Huh, it is 'a message from MONO...' ... Huh?

It came too suddenly, and made me open the message from the menu in a hurry.

In there -- was just a simple line.

"Thank you for your support all this while."

"....."

I read those words four times... Then looked out the window.

Unfortunately, the weather was a bit gloomy. It wasn't going to rain, but there wasn't any sign of the sky clearing, a strange weather... But this was actually the most comfortable weather.

... A plain half hearted everyday life without any pretty girls... Isn't too bad either.

I started playing with my phone again with an awkward smile.

Today, I spent a lazy day with my gaming buddy like usual.



## Footnotes

1. [\[↑\]](#) Spell from Dai no Daibôken.
2. [\[↑\]](#) [GameFAQ](#)
3. [\[↑\]](#) [Rathian](#)
4. [\[↑\]](#) [Puzzle & Dragons](#)
5. [\[↑\]](#) [The Spider's Thread](#)

# Chapter 2 - Uehara Tasuku and Restarting After Getting Stronger

“Ehhhh, Tasuku~~ Help Aguri catch that plushiel~~”

“Ah?”

Aguri whined as she tugged at my sleeve, and I couldn't help turning my head back with a pouting face.

A girl who appeared dull witted at a glance was looking up at me. She had a light tan, and her hair was dyed a faded orange. But thanks to her face and body figure, she was cute on the whole and her skills in appealing to men was top notch.

I tried putting on airs, but Aguri ignored that completely. She forcefully pulled me to the Claw Crane Game and pointed with her finger, saying: “That one, that one!”

“Ehhh, doesn't that look sick?”

“... Ah~~ totally sick.”

Sick in a negative way. There were many cute kittens inside the Claw Crane Machine... Various plush toys that had weird changes to the usual design of the kittens, some had two long legs, others were full of muscles.

Even though I felt they were ‘sick’, but from the way Aguri squealed excitedly, her definition of ‘sick’ was probably opposite from mine... Instead of ‘ugly cute’, wasn't ‘normal cute’ better? Or was my sense of aesthetic behind the current times?

I rubbed my neck lazily.

“... You want me to catch that one?”

“Yes! Because Tasuku is cheekily skilled in games!”

“What cheekily skilled...?”

I couldn't help snickering. My gaming skill is much better than Aguri's but I didn't play much games before her at all. I think she saw me played fighting games a couple of times, so she thought I was 'cheekily good'. Thinking that I was good with Claw Crane Machine because of that, was how people who don't usually touch games would feel.

“Tasuku~~ catch it for me okay~~”

“Well, I don't mind catching it... So, the hundred yen?”

“... Tasuku~~ C-Catch it for me.”

Aguri played it off with a smile. T-This girl...!

I sighed as I dug out a hundred yen coin from my wallet. Aguri who was squealing behind me might be annoying, but this wasn't the first day she behaved like this. In fact, her frivolous style was popular among the boys... To be honest, I didn't really get it though.

I pressed the two buttons that controlled lateral and vertical movements respectively, and made the mechanical claw reach down in the vicinity of the plushie Aguri wanted. In the end...

“Ah, such a pity~~!”

“Sigh, that's a shame.”

Wasting a hundred yen hurts me a little, but I didn't invest any emotion in the plushie itself at all. I turned to leave -- but my arm was grabbed strongly by Aguri.

“Once more! Tasuku, one more try! You can do it! You can definitely catch it!”

“You...”

What's with this girl? She want me to keep playing until I catch that plushie? For a game machine like this, shouldn't she be grateful that I am willing to use my own money for one try?

To be honest, I didn't want to humour her. But if I ignored Aguri here, it would be troublesome later. If the alternative was me having to treat Aguri to a pancake to cheer her up, since I already threw in a hundred yen, I would be better off showing off my sincerity and carry on the challenge.

With no other choice, I threw in another hundred yen, and leaned forward a little more seriously.

This time, I inspected the entire machine carefully, and found my serious face reflected on the glass.

My brown hair was carefully styled, and my brows neatly trimmed; placing emphasis on washing my face with lotion kept my skin so smooth and clean that not a spot of acne was visible; a dull silver earring was hanging from my left ear.

Ah~~ I am cool today too.

My unpleasant mood diminished a little. And behind me was my girlfriend who wasn't that smart, but could definitely be described as cute.

Hey hey, I am a winner in life, right?

I couldn't help peeking at my past self who was residing in a corner of my mind... And greeted the me from my middle school days. In response, the plain guy with side parting and glasses and uniform buttoned all the way up answered meekly with a smile: "That's right." ... That guy was still the same, why can't he smile a bit more cheerfully?

I focused on the Claw Crane machine to escape from that mindset. After spending plenty of time and carefully controlling the buttons, the mechanical claw stopped right on top of the plushie -- and slightly

to the side. Aguri said unhappily:

“Ahh! Tasuku, what are you doing! How sloppy!”

“Noisy, just watch.”

After I said that, the mechanical claw slowly... descended to the position slightly off to the side. As I expected, it didn't grab the plushie-- however, one side of the claw hooked onto the tag on the plushie splendidly.

“Ahhh!”

Aguri opened her eyes wide. After the mechanical arm rose with the tag in tow, it was wobbling unsteadily, but the plushie didn't fall. Next, it returned to the starting point... and the claw opened, dropping the plushie at the prize retrieval slot.

The next instance, Aguri took out the plushie excitedly, and showed it to me as if she was the one who caught it then said:

“How sick! It's really fluffy! Tasuku you are really good at games~~!”

“... Don't get too excited.”

Feeling a little embarrassed, I averted my eyes. To be honest, half of it was a fluke. I did aim for the tag, but I wasn't good enough to be certain that it would definitely work, so the over exaggerated praise was a little troubling. Eh, getting my girlfriend to fall for me again wasn't too bad--

“Wah~~ ... Awesome...”

“?”

-- I turned and saw a male schoolmate who was wearing an Otobuki high school uniform just like us. It seemed that he just happened to see me playing the Claw Crane game as he stared

blankly at the kitten plushie Aguri was holding with a dumb impressed face.

... Hmmm? This guy is...

At this moment, I realized that I knew this guy. He seemed to have noticed us at the same time. When Aguri looked at him and asked “What’s the matter?” his face blushed and he panickedly bowed at us before leaving in a hurry.

Aguri tilted his head confusedly.

“Ehh... What was that?”

“Ah, he is our classmate, although we never spoke before.”

“That’s right. But why did he run away?”

“Ehh, instead of running...”

A classmate that he wasn’t close to had a girl who seemed to be his girlfriend. Normally speaking, it would be quite difficult to chat with me in such a situation. Aguri didn’t seem to think that far, and looked baffled.

I just said: “Doesn’t matter, it’s great that we caught the plushie.”

And so, Aguri’s mood became great as she hugged the plushie tightly in her chest... The way she intentionally hugs it with the head of the kitty facing me was really skilled... Well, that was definitely cute.

As she had something extra in her hands, we left the arcade directly and headed home.

After we exited downtown and I bid Aguri farewell, I walked by myself for a while. As I was about to take a shortcut through the park... it suddenly hit me.

Ah, that’s Amano. Amano... what’s his name? Anyway, he’s that

guy from my class...

I remembered the family name of the classmate I just met, but no matter how long I thought, I couldn't remember anything else. I smiled wryly.

Speaking of which, he was probably more plain than me in my middle school days. I wouldn't be that impressed with someone playing a Claw Crane game. And he was in such a panic just seeing me who he never even talked to being with my girlfriend... how lame.

I smiled awkwardly as I recalled the dumb look on that plain classmate. My mood turned great for no good reason as I whistled badly and strode through the quiet residential zone.

“... Yawn... Morning~~”

I stifled my yawn as I greeted Daiki and Masaya. I dumped my schoolbag onto the table, tickled the waist of Shiyouji who was sitting at my seat, getting him to move away.

The four of us played around a little, then Masaya's girlfriend Mika came in, followed by a girl from the light music club Reina that Shiyouji hooked up with recently. The group started chatting idly as usual.

Today's topic was mainly about Masaya and Mika complaining about their karaoke session yesterday. Even though I commented: “That's horrible.” the topic wasn't that interesting. My eyes wandered carelessly in the classroom to stave off my boredom. At this moment, the boy who I never paid attention to in the past appeared in a corner of my vision suddenly.

Amano Keita...

I looked at him because I ran into him at the arcade yesterday. After observing him a while, he really was a boy without anything. It goes without saying that he had nothing to do with me, he wasn't prominent in school at all. As far as I know, I have never heard any

friends talked about him at all... For example, who he was close to, what club he was in, nothing at all. I only learned his name after looking through the class nominal roll that was placed inside the classroom.

I couldn't help smiling wryly.

People with a sense of presence as thin as a ghost... they can be found anywhere.

If we flip through the graduation booklet during a class reunion ten years later, we will definitely have a hard time recalling his name... That's how I felt.

Is he happy with such a plain life?

I suddenly remembered how I was in my middle school days. It was different from Amano, but my life was really dull too. I would just work hard on preparing for my high school entrance exam as instructed by my parents, and play games occasionally for entertainment. I lived my life seriously, and was influenced by the people around me to attempt the entrance exam of a high school beyond my standard... After failing, I entered my safety school Otobuki. This was treated as a scar that shouldn't be mentioned by my family.

In the end, you can only win in life by living in the moment.

Talking about life at such a age might seem a little arrogant, but ever since I made up my mind to start over again, my life had been smooth sailing.

Right, for example, this was like 'The ant and the grasshopper'.

The guidance of my parents was a factor, the young naive me was nurtured to have the view that I should 'live seriously like the ant' after hearing the story.

However, instead of the ant who had to work hard in order to save



for the future, I think the grasshopper who got a share of the food just by apologizing was smarter and more worthy of respect.

... At this point, I tilted my head.

Weird? Why... am I thinking so deep about Amano's circumstances?

When I realized it, my mood turned sour. What was going on? Amano didn't do anything to me, we were classmates whose path didn't cross at all. I didn't have any reason to be this frustrated.

... Ah, no...

After thinking this far, I realized something.

Why was I so flustered when I looked at Amano? The reason was...

That guy... Why does he look so happy...?

That's right, that was the reason why I felt flustered.

At a glance, Amano was sitting by his lonesome self in his seat, but he was smiling about something. I thought he was busy with some stuff, but he was toying with his phone. From the position of his fingers, he wasn't texting or surfing the web, but playing games.

Now that I thought about it, this guy was always playing games by himself after class. He was happily isolated from the outside world, minding his own business without being noticed by us.

Even so, there shouldn't be any reason that would make me flustered... Why was that? Amano was just playing games on his phone, but he looked so cheerful...

What the hell... So lame. I can't stand it...

I couldn't help scowling my face, and Masaya suddenly toss the topic to me.

“Isn’t that right, Tasuku!? Don’t you think that is awful? What I ordered was fried chicken, fried chicken!”

“T... True, you are right. A cold fried chicken is not even half as delicious as before.”

“Absolutely! Hmm, Tasuku, you feel me!? Please work over there~~”

“Forget it, I can’t be bothered to work.”

I faked a smile as I joined them in their idle chat. It wasn’t that boring, and everyone bickered with Masaya, such times were enjoyable too. However...

I glanced at Amano, peeking at what he was doing.

So why... Do you look happier than me?

He should be a loser in life, but the face he was showing seemed happier than me who was chatting with my friends, and I felt dissatisfied by this. Just what was he so happy about?

“? What’s the matter Tasuku? Feeling unwell?”

Reina who saw my sour face asked.

I was panicking in my heart, but I still found an out for myself.

“Nothing, I just got a bit unhappy after listening to what Masaya described.”

I pretended to be angry, and the pure Masaya seemed to be very moved.

“Oh, my dear friend! Tasuku, you really are a good guy!”

“You didn’t know? That’s right, no matter what, I will always take the side of... Mean customers.”

“How wicked!”

Everyone retorted, then laughed out loud. I didn't care about the classmates who turned our way, wondering what happened as I laughed dumbly with my friends.

What am I doing? Why should I care about someone like Amano... Alright.

And so, I made up my mind again.

“Don't be annoying! I am a good guy! Before this, Aguri even asked me--”

I pushed the plain nerdy classmate out from my mind, and resumed my rowdy everyday life.

Until a few days later, when the famous Tendo Karen came to chat with Amano.

After class was over, Class 2F would split into groups of various sizes, chatting idly together and creating a noisy atmosphere.

Among them, our group of six was exceptionally influential.

Leaving our numbers aside, the six of us were the type with lots of acquaintances and friends in class, and would naturally influence the overall atmosphere of class 2F.

When we laugh, the emotions in class would become high; when we rage, the tension of the other people would rise.

And so, whether class 2F was rowdy or not was mostly dependent on us.

And now-

The school idol Tendo Karen suddenly graced us with her presence, and the entire class turned silent.

Tendo... Why is she...

I couldn't help holding my breath because of the blonde schoolmate standing at the entrance of the class. The first to notice Tendo was Mika who was always looking around her. From the angle she was looking from, she already saw Tendo walking along the corridor. But at that moment, Mika just treated it as a part of the conversation, pointing to the corridor as she said: "Ehh, look, it's Tendo-san..."

When we heard Mika, we all turned to look at the face of the rare beauty... At this moment.

We noticed this at the same time... and were all stunned by the fact that Tendo was about to enter Class F.

Influenced by our silence, everyone in class noticed Tendo's existence-

She surveyed the classroom from the entrance, and smiled as if she found a lost treasure. Then-

"Ah, found you, Amano-kun!"

- Nobody expected that... Tendo was here for the person who was furthest away from her in a sense, Amano Keita.

All the chatter in class stopped instantly, and then... following Tendo's actions, we all focused our gaze on Amano.

At the same time, I was feeling agitated for some reason.

... Why would she find someone like Amano...

It was similar to the 'frustration' I felt about Amano a few days ago, the same emotion was reignited in my heart.

Amano seemed to be shaken by Tendo's appearance and being the center of attention in class too. His plain face was even more stiff now, and he couldn't even smile... Agitation mixed in with several

other complicated emotions were gradually expanding in my chest.

On the other hand, Tendo who didn't seem to mind the gaze of the crowd strode forth confidently and approached Amano's seat nimbly. When she was before his desk... She leaned to look at the phone Amano was toying with in an intimate way.

“!”

Some of our classmates finally made some wavering noise, and sound returned to the classroom.

Tendo seemed to be talking about something to Amano, but because of the whispering everywhere, I couldn't hear what they were saying clearly.

The only thing I could tell was that Tendo was talking to Amano rather one sidedly. Games, promise, library... I heard these terms, but I couldn't grasp the contents of their conversation.

As the class was getting anxious, Amano seemed to have nodded at Tendo hurriedly several times. And the next instant-

“I see!”

Tendo smiled and enchanted the entire class. At the same time, when everyone noticed that she was smiling just at Amano, the wavering in our heart increased and the noise level went up a notch.

However, the bell announcing that class would be starting soon rang as if on cue, and Tendo said hurriedly: “Ah, I have to go now. See you after school, Amano-kun!” She said in an intimate tone and left right away.

When the entire class was dumbfounded, and Amano who was left behind watched Tendo leave in a daze-

Shiyouji beside me muttered something that left a deep impression on my mind.

“What the heck was that...”

These words seemed to represent how the entire Class 2F felt.

But before I could gossip with my friends, the teacher came in to start the next lesson, so it left a strange ‘itch’ in the heart of everyone in class.

I laid out my textbook and notebook onto my table, and pretended to listen to class as I thought about Amano. Unfortunately, from the seat assignment, I couldn’t see Amano who was beside the window at the back of the classroom from my seat in the middle, but he was definitely...

Showing a cocky face that is saying ‘did you all see that?’

Once I imagined that, my unpleasant mood wouldn’t stop.

The plain loner nerd who was suddenly chatted up by the number beauty in the entire school.

This was like the story from a boring trash light novel. The subject might be having the time of his life, but from the perspectives of the people around him, there was nothing that was more disgusting than this. I knew very well that was jealousy or ‘sour grapes mentality’, but so what? That was my true feelings right now. In fact, most of my classmates more or less felt annoyed by this.

... Sigh.

That might be so, I was aware that I my reaction was bigger than others.

After all... I didn’t meet with such a wonderful salvation in middle school... Damn it!

I got angrier the more I thought about it. Amano Keita. As I couldn’t see his face, I imagined that he was showing a smug face. Even ignoring that, I was still...

... Who would be happy to see a plain nerd who didn't put in any effort to obtain happiness out of nowhere... Arghh, so annoying!

I took out my stationeries in a rough manner.

After that, I stabbed the lead of my mechanical pencil into my white eraser again and again.

The next afterclass break, the classroom was covered in a strange atmosphere. Even though the groups were all chatting as usual, but the topic revolves around Amano and Tendo. It was the same for us, especially the two girls who were speculating blindly.

As for me... To be honest, I think the act of 'chatting about this topic' would make Amano happy, so I didn't participate too keenly. However, when Reina asked cheerfully: "So, what exactly are their relationship?", I couldn't help responding.

"Reina, what do you think?"

"Hmm? Me? Ehh~~ That's hard to say. It will be fun if it is love related. Well, to be honest, it doesn't feel that way, saying they are friends is unrealistic too. They felt more like official business contacts?"

"You mean, the two of them got acquainted through club society or their jobs?"

That felt close to the truth. As I was about to let it go, Mika who loves to gossip made a 'Hmm~~' sound.

"That is boring~~ And actually, I remember that Tendo-san didn't join any committees or clubs right? And to be frank, I don't think she works part time."

Masaya nodded in agreement to Mika's opinion.

"That's right. Tendo's family is rich right? And also, I don't have any impression of Amano working or joining clubs."

“Or rather, Amano didn’t leave much of an impression at all.”

Daiki’s words made everyone laugh. I joined in too, but my laugh was superficial.

As we slowly went off topic and everyone started fooling around-

I noticed that... I couldn’t let my unhappy mood go, and treated this as an entertaining piece of gossip like everyone else.

What the... Having so much fun talking about Amano. Are you all retards? How boring.

I peeked at Amano. Even though he was intimidated by the gaze of the entire class, he seem unconcerned with the surroundings, and was looking at his desk with sparkling eyes. I was wondering what he was doing, but he seemed to be engrossed in his game. He wasn’t playing with his phone, but a handheld console.

... Hmmp, what a loner. Are games that fun?

There was a time when I was addicted to games. During the spare time I had while preparing for exams, I found the large arcade machines really interesting. And with the unique sense of space it had, it was a refuge for my soul during middle school. That was why I would be as excited as Pavlov’s dog whenever I step into an arcade. However...

At least the time I spent chatting between classes with my friends are more meaningful than games. That guy is just hiding in his own world, engrossed in his games...

Even though we were the same age, I detested him with a ‘kids these days’ sort of feeling. I couldn’t stand it.

... Well, other than Amano, there were a few others who spent the time after class by themselves, but somehow, I didn’t feel flustered when I look at them. I only felt pissed off about Amano... Because of his expression when he looks at the screen of the game.



Thinking back, that guy had always been showing such a face after class. He didn't laughed out loud, and was simply staring at the screen with a dumb smile, as if he was enjoying a little piece of happiness. That was why he could blend into the rowdy atmosphere in class despite being a loner, and won't become a subject in others conversation for better or worse, or remain in other's vision.

Not for me... It felt like he was making a dig at me. After all, even though I was surrounded by friends, I felt from the bottom of my heart that the things they were talking about was boring, and my smile was completely fake.

... What... You got a problem with that? Don't look down on interpersonal relations.

Even though Amano didn't say anything, I averted my eyes from him.

... I will find Aguri and play in the arcade after school.

I didn't know why I decided on that. And because I could look forward to that, I was able to make it through the entire day of Tendo and Amano topic.

And so, school ended like what I was hoping for.

After finishing up on cleaning duties, I met up with my cute girlfriend at the school gate.

Alright, we will set off to the arcade happily. But on the way there-

"Oh right, Tasuku, that Amano something is in the same class as you right?"

- When I heard Aguri said that...

I felt faint, as if I was lost in a nightmare.

Aguri who was walking beside me didn't notice my face was tense,

and kept going on while swinging her school bag around.

“It was an uproar in Class C too. The famous Tendo-san actually went to find a male schoolmate from another class-”

“- So noisy!”

“Huh?”

I couldn't help yelling, and scared Aguri into stopping in her tracks. I glared at her for a moment, but noticed I had lost my composure and soothed her:

“It's nothing, nothing. It's fine...”

Strange, my tongue was not working well. I seemed to have reverted to my middle school self.

I squeezed out a stiff smile to the stunned Aguri.

“I-I'm sorry. I think... Let's not go to the arcade today, and go home straight alright?”

“Huh? A-Alright... It's okay... Tasuku, are you feeling unwell?”

Aguri looked my way with a face of concern. But I hid how I felt and only told her: “I'm just not in the mood.” and kept walking.

Aguri caught up with me but still couldn't read the mood and talked about Amano again.

“And so, that Amano boy, what do you think he is like -”

“I'm telling you!”

I said in a heavy tone and cut her off forcefully.

“There couldn't be any guy who is good enough for Tendo in a school like Otobuki.”

“Hmm? Is that so?”

Aguri thought naively. I sighed and continued:

“It is a miracle that Tendo actually enrolled in this school with such low entrance grades. In fact, people from elite schools and baseball club members from famous schools would confess to her every other day. Why would a girl like that look for a suitor from the bottom feeder guys in Otobuki...?”

“Ah, but I think that you and Tendo-san match rather well, Tasuku.”

When I heard something that didn’t sound like what a girlfriend would say, I turned my head in surprise. But Aguri didn’t seem to mind at all... She had the same dull look as usual, and said calmly with a smile:

“You are handsome with good points too, and is amazing at everything you do. You two would be a perfect match.”

“... That’s right.”

I felt disheartened... This girl is the same as usual, just how do her nerves look like? Where in the world would you find someone naive enough to say her own boyfriend is a good match for other girls... I couldn’t stand her.

Speaking of which, the reason I started dating Aguri was really casual too. When I debuted successfully in the high school social world, I bid farewell to my dark middle school days and was making a lot of friends, she confessed to me on a certain day in winter even though we just met: “Uehara, let’s start dating~~” The fact was, Aguri looked really cute, and with no reason to turn her down, I started dating her out of nowhere. That happened about half a year ago.

... After that, the things we had actually done was just playing together like this after school. And we both had plenty of friends, so

we didn't stick to each other on non school days, and didn't go on any proper date before. We didn't create any nice atmosphere, so things like kissing or beyond didn't even need to be mentioned.

... I was a healthy high school boy too. Even though I was filled with lust, but for some reason, probably because Aguri being the one who confessed, I had some strange pride that stopped me from taking the initiative to do anything to her. But Aguri also maintained this pace, so our relationship developed into playmates who could talk about anything without worries, while our boy girl relationship didn't move forward one bit. In the end, I couldn't really grasp the difference between Aguri and my other female friends, so I couldn't be more 'aggressive' with her.

... That might be so, but we were still a couple, so saying things like 'you match Tendo-san well' is too insensitive.

I glared at Aguri's eyes.

"So you are determining if we match by our looks?"

"Huh? Yes! You are handsome after all, and Tendo-san is cute just like me!"

"... How stupid."

I already thought that Aguri was a stupid girl, but I didn't expect her to be this retarded. She probably confessed to me for my looks anyway, it would be a joke to describe it as love at first sight. Really now, women these days... Wait, I shouldn't use Aguri as the standard. Mika and Reina might be frivolous, but not this bad... sigh.

It is true that dating a girl like Tendo might be a happy ending...

If I was choosing a partner solely on looks, she would be the top choice. No, it was the same for her personality. At least, if I was dating her, our relationship wouldn't be as tiring like Aguri and mine was. Even chatting would be a joy, if anyone could monopolize Tendo's intimate smile and shy expression, be it boy or girl, they

would be captivated by her... That was why...

Why did that girl just have to choose Amano...?

Probably because Aguri said I was compatible with Tendo, my flustered emotions came back... Arggh, enough already! I felt like asking myself what was wrong with me! I kept thinking about Amano, Amano!

In a fit of the moment, I grabbed Aguri's hand crudely.

"Come Aguri, let's go home!"

"Huh? Eh, but I am not going in that direction, Tasuku..."

After she reminded me, I realized we were at the splitting point where we should be heading home separately. I felt my face heating up a little, but I couldn't take my words back, so I pulled Aguri to conceal my embarrassment.

"I-It's fine! Aguri, a-accompany me home some time!"

Even I would feel that a guy like this would be too much of a brute. What the hell? It's fine for a boyfriend to walk her girl home, but forcing his girlfriend to walk home with him doesn't even happen in the olden patriarchal society, and was just plain retarded.

I made up my mind to let go of her hand and dash back home once Aguri rejects me. However, it just happened that my girlfriend couldn't read the mood...

"... Uwah. Alright, I will send you home~~!"

Aguri was all smiles for some reason, and accepted my suggestion excitedly... Since she said that, I couldn't turn her down now.

"Ugh... A-Alright! I will let you walk me home!"

"Yes! Hehehe~~"

Aguri held my hand again with glee... Eh, what's with this girl... And what's with me today...?

In the end, it's all Amano's fault!

After deflecting all the responsibility, I managed to keep a steady mind... And walked home all lovey dovey with Aguri depressed.

... How unfathomable...

Ugh, enough already, what is this...

The next morning, in class 2F.

I had thrown aside all the frustration and doubts from yesterday, but I was still stunned. Not just me, the entire class was the same after witnessing 'that scene'. It would be hard not to, after seeing 'that scene'.

'That scene' - refers to...

Amano... dumped Tendo Karen!

Amano rejected Tendo about something, and with tears of vexation in her eyes, she left Class F with a flushed face - What an unbelievable scene.

After witnessing that scene that could very well herald the end of times, the classroom fell into utter chaos.

"Huh? What happened? This is the first time I have seen Tendo-san looked so vexed..."

"Yeah, that's obviously emotional entanglement!"

Mika and Masaya said in a volume loud enough that Amano might hear them, even Daiki, Shiyouji and Reina were discussing it too. They said that it sounded something like clubs, Tendo's reaction being abnormal, and even suggested asking Amano.

They asked for my opinion too, but I answered disinterestedly. During all this while, I was staring right at Amano.

Honestly, just what are you thinking...?

Despite what just happened, Amano was still toying with his phone happily. Even though he seemed depressed and regretful momentarily, after he looked at his phone and smiled, he reverted to that 'Amano who smiles happily even though he was playing with his phone alone'.

... He rejected Tendo's invitation, so why is he showing such a face...?

I gulped. Instead of frustration, I felt more crept out. However, I got the gist of their relations.

Tendo probably invited Amano to join a certain club yesterday. As she was exceptionally loud today, we could hear this part clearly.

However... Amano turned her down coldly... He actually turned her down.

For Tendo, this was an unexpected turn of events. Her face turned red midway, and even left with an expression that she rarely showed... Even though this wasn't a matter about love, the class would still riot. After chattering noisily for a while, Mika looked towards Amano and muttered:

"This feels... a little annoying..."

"Huh?"

After hearing something unexpected from Mika, I shifted my gaze away from Amano. Mika said a little flusteredly: "No, it's nothing deep..."

After opening unconfidently, she continued:

“I think he is putting on airs... A-After all, he was invited kindly, would normal people reject this?”

What surprised me was that the other three agreed with what Mika said. Even though I was annoyed with Amano in the beginning, I couldn't keep up with their train of thoughts and started defending Amano:

“Well, there is probably some reasons we don't know?”

This time, Reina doubted my opinion: “Is that so?”

“If there is some compelling reason, Tendo won't show such a face right?”

“Eh...”

“From what I am seeing, I think she was rejected because of Amano's state of mind.”

Reina had a keen eye in observing others. That was true. If there was a good reason, Tendo's expression would show that it was a shame, and she wouldn't react that way.

Shiyouji who had the aura of being a ‘follower’ in the group sighed in resignation, and mumbled:

“He is the receiving party, yet he still wants to keep up his ego, how unsightly.”

When I heard him say that, I felt a fire surge up within me for some reason. I couldn't help lashing out at Shiyouji:

“... We are all students from the same school year, so there isn't any higher or lower status anyway.”

“Huh? Eh, what's with you, Tasuku?”

I only realized after seeing Shiyouji acting a little shaken up... What lofty things was I talking about? Yes, there were higher and lower



status. In fact, I thought that Amano was lower down the totem pole than me right? So what was I saying...

The quick witted and calm Daiki noticed that I was shaken up, and helped to smooth out the situation.

“But I do feel that Amano is looking down on people today.”

It was a brilliant way of putting it. Thanks to that, what I said earlier could be interpreted as me feeling annoyed by ‘Amano looking down on others. The truth was, such a flawed explanation couldn’t smooth out the conversation that well, but Shiyouji and I were both happy to accept it, and the discussion moved on.

I was relieved and rejoined the conversation. We discussed about Tendo and Amano passionately up until the bell rang.

I felt guilty about spoiling the mood for a short instance, and worked hard in talking about delusions and nonsensical speculations for laughs...

But whenever there was a pause, my gaze would be drawn to Amano who was playing games happily by himself.

After school, I visited the arcade myself because Aguri couldn’t make it at the last moment. After visiting it one time, I would unconsciously visit it several more times. I was very particular about things, and would focus single mindedly into things I was engrossed in.

I remembered that was the reason why I kept my distance from games when I prepared for my high school entrance exams...

As I walked along the streets, I recalled this. Why had I thought until a moment ago that the reason I strayed away from games was because I was ‘tired of it’ or ‘faded interest’? Even though I really like games, and only managed to pull through by keeping my distance.

From this perspective, it was only natural for my passion to be

reignited after I started visiting the arcade with Aguri.

After I reached the arcade, I walked around the entire facility. Even though it was not that easy to bring in new machines, the rewards of prize machines do change frequently. My taste was different from Aguri, and I wasn't interested in plushies. But I found something I kind of liked today and stopped in my tracks.

That's... a game cartridge?

Several cartridges for the last gen portable game console was placed inside the 500yen per game machine as prizes, as if it was a bazaar for second hand goods. As this was a rare situation and I found a game that I wanted to play in middle school but skipped in order to prepare for entrance exams, I put in 500 yen before I realized it.

I was surprised by how moved I was as I controlled the mechanical arm and aimed. The old game was probably cheap, and the packaging had a spot that could be hooked on, a kind design.

I maneuvered the mechanical arm and hooked the tag splendidly, and the prize moved waveringly to me. It fell with a dull thud. To be honest, I felt this wasn't the proper way of treating the game, but it was hard to complain about it either.

After I took the prize, I sighed and wondered why I picked this game after all this time-

"Wah, so strong."

- Right after that, I heard a familiar voice from my side. I turned and it was like Déjà vu... An impressed Amano was standing there with sparkling eyes.

I showed a speechless and perplexed face as I looked at Amano. He probably realized he said something after that and started blushing and panicking.

... He doesn't look like someone who would reject Tendo so

completely...

Thinking carefully, Amano looked really shady when he wasn't playing games, and was a normal pitiful loner... Will his personality change when games were involved?

I thought as I stared at Amano, and he was completely flustered... He still mustered courage out of somewhere and walked towards me. He then bowed.

"Ah, I am Amano! The Amano from your class!"

"I know that."

I answered casually. But this fellow didn't seem to read the mood, ignored my attitude and inched closer. He then... pointed at the game I won as a prize in my hand.

"T-This! You are amazing, Uehara-san! You caught a plushie the other time too!"

"H-Huh? Erm, it's nothing... just lucky..."

What was going on? Why was this guy talking to me? It was too unexpected, so I didn't know how to react.

As I was thinking about various stuff, Amano continued:

"Erm, U-Uehara-san, do you like games? W-Why did you pick this prize...?"

"Hmm? Ah... Not really, this is just lucky. There was a game I felt like playing..."

"Huh, which game is it?"

"Ughh."

Amano got even closer. What was with him? A nerd to the very core?

I felt he was annoying, but still answered:

“A game called ‘Paradigm of Fantasia’...”

“Oh, POF!”

Amano’s eyes lit up for some reason. I didn’t want to foray into this, but I could understand that people like him seem to like this game series.

The Fantasia games were a rather famous RPG series. It was similar to Dragon Quest, each iteration was a standalone story. The title doesn’t use numbers, but changes the ‘xxx’ in the game title of ‘XXX of Fantasia’. By the way, the first game was called ‘blah Fantasia’, a timeless game that had been remastered several times.

And the battles were side scrolling action games. That was why the gameplay fitted me who prefer fighting games really well, and I played several games in this series. However, I had to prepare for my exams when the latest game was released, and I had to give up on games and abandon the series.

Other than that, just from the packaging and promotion videos, I couldn’t deny that the art style and story of this series was trending towards nerds. I felt embarrassed about touching them, and started shying away. I couldn’t get use to the illustrations in recent years...

Amano didn’t know I had such complicated feelings started chatting with me enthusiastically, based on the fact that I like this series.

“This is a masterpiece! Uehara-san, if you like this series you have to play this!”

“I-Is that so?”

“Yes! When the entire series was maturing, the developers claimed that they want to ‘revolutionize the concept of gaming’ before pushing out this iteration. After it retails, people realized it followed

the traditional formula of the Fantasia series, and it was swamped by critical reviews. But in actual fact, it was really well made! That's why I am so confident about recommending this to you!"

"Well, even with your guarantee..."

Instead of Amano's taste, I would rather refer to the comments on Amazon. As I started to scratch my head, wondering what I should do next, Amano seemed to have snapped out of it. His face turned red, and he moved away from me and shrivelled his body.

"I-I'm sorry! I let it got to my head..."

"Eh, it's okay... Ah~~ Sorry, I must have given you a fright."

I was also reflecting on it. At the very least, I shouldn't use such an attitude to treat a classmate who came to me with kind intentions. So I decided to take a step back, alongside Amano. Amano laughed awkwardly, then raised his head and looked at me apologetically.

"Eh, well, I did something stupid recently, and missed the chance to befriend fellow games enthusiasts... That's why I went crazy and thought it was a good chance when I saw you caught a prize twice in a row in crane games, and got too excited... I'm sorry."

"No, don't need to apologize... Ah~~ ... Erm, thanks for coming to chat with me."

"Huh? Ah, I get it..."

We then turned silent while facing each other... What was this? A matchmaking date?

As I was having a headache about what to do, Amano lowered his head out of concern for me and said: "Ah, I will make a move first..." Then turned his back to me.

Amano hurried along to another area with arcade machines. I watched his movement with complicated feelings for a moment-

And...

What the hell... Is he doing...?

Amano wanted to try the newest fighting game, but was afraid that someone would sit in the machine opposite him for a fight, so he withdrew. He then looked for a single player arcade machine, but they just happened to be full right now. He ended up in front of the machine for 'Tank Wars', and was hesitating about playing it. Well, Tank Wars was a fun game...

Could it be... He likes video games, but isn't used to the arcade environment?

It was true that there was a gulf between arcade players and home console players. Although I was the type who played both sides frequently, many people only come in contact with one side. From the way Amano looked, he definitely belonged to the home console faction.

Amano started dazing and wandering about- This time, a student from another school clicked his tongue at Amano, even though Amano didn't get in anyone's way. That affected him deeply and he became really depressed... W-What the hell was he doing?

In the end, Amano didn't play anything and walked out of the arcade depressingly-

"Wait wait wait!"

"?"

I couldn't help chasing after Amano, and put a hand on his shoulder. Amano looked back at me confusedly, his face was just like a baby rabbit that had been abandoned by its mother!!

I scratched my head... then grunted exasperatingly: "Ah~~ enough!" then looked Amano in the eyes.

"Hey Amano, can you accompany for a while?"

"Huh?"

Amano who was chatted up by me opened his eyes wide. His face was getting redder...

"Ah, I-I'm not interested in guys-"

"Don't pull such a old cliché even if you want to run. How about it? Want to play together? Or not?"

"... Please allow me to accompany you."

Amano pleaded with his head low.

I shrugged in haplessly.

Not thinking carefully about it, what was I doing... I couldn't help holding my temple to ease my headache.

The game Amano picked was originally a home console RPG, but in response to its popularity, an arcade fighting game was made for it. The story was also a continuation after the ending of that RPG, that was why Amano who loved that game made up his mind to visit an arcade he normally wouldn't visit.

Amano scratched his head shyly as he queued to play the game together with me.

"I came here before, but as expected of the newest game, it was always occupied. Even if it was empty for a moment, someone else would play it immediately, that's why I felt bad about watching the cutscenes and story leisurely."

That's right, I met Amano here last time too. So he went straight home that time then... Just how negative was he? It was dumbfounding... However...

"....."

"?Uehara-san?"

"Ah, it's nothing..."

Amano peeked at me after I suddenly stopped talking... The truth was, the more I learn about his character... the greater the dissonance he had from my impression of him because of Tendo's incident.

Unable to hold back, I asked him directly:

"Amano, erm... What is your relationship with Tendo?"

Oh crap, my face is heating up. I was very conscious of such a senseless question, and it was draining on my psyche to even ask. If it was Aguri, she would ask it nonchalantly. But it was true that this thing had been nagging at my heart.

My rude question... made Amano smile a little troubledly.

"I-I see, that incident at the end of class... You saw it too right, Uehara-san?"

"Yes.... S-Sorry, if it is a private issue, then there's no need to-"

"Ah, no, it's not that serious!"

Amano waved his head hurriedly. I decided to question him further.

"It sounded like you rejected a club invitation..."

"Ah, you already know that much. Ugh~... Well, considering the nature of that club, I hope you can keep this between us..."

After making that clear, Amano, he told me the briefly what happened between him and Tendo. To be honest, it wasn't that big of a deal after hearing it. He just happened to meet Tendo, and was invited to join her club, that's all. I was surprised that the club was a 'Gamers Club', but everything else was a normal run of the mill. Invited to join a club, Amano went to visit it. However, if there was



something unusual about this story, that would be...

“And so? Why didn’t you join the Gamers Club? To be honest, I still don’t understand your explanation about that crucial part. What exactly is the difference between the Gamers Club and the the games you want to play?”

I asked while I checked if the player in front of us had finished their bout. Amano then showed a very troubled face.

“Eh... how should I put this? Erm~~... It’s hard to explain...”

“But, don’t you want to meet friends you can talk about games with?”

“T-That is true... Ugh—...”

Amano stammered, and the frustration that was gone came back to me again... Sigh, damn it. Why do I feel so annoyed whenever I see him? Even I wasn’t sure what I am so caught up about, which made it even more infuriating.

“Ah, Uehara-san, look. Two seats facing each other have just been vacated! Let’s go play there!”

“Hmm... Ah, okay.”

Just when I turned silent, two spots opened up at the machines, and we quickly filled them... To be honest, I was saved. With how I was just now, who knows what I would say to Amano. I was certain that I would vent at him unreasonably because of the frustration I felt.

Anyway, let’s play a game and cool down.

I checked and didn’t see anyone aside from us queuing for this machine. After Amano was satisfied with looking at the opening scenes and the character intro, I inserted a hundred yen coin and was ready to fight him.

“You don’t want to see the story mode?”

I asked Amano from the other side of the machine. He raised his voice and answered:

“Yes. I will enjoy that part when the home console version is published. Let’s fight, Uehara-san!”

“Okay. Be mesmerized by my splendid technique.”

“Hold back a little alright?”

I wanted to play with memes, but Amano answered me seriously, so it felt a little embarrassing.

If it was Aguri, she would laugh like an idiot... huh?

What am I doing? Wasn’t I feeling really great that I didn’t come to the arcade with Aguri, and happy about the peace and quiet? Stop kidding, she will just scream like a banshee if she was here.

I focused on the screen again, and Amano already chose his character. The cliché main character. This was a steady choice when playing a game for the first time...

Then I will choose...

I fiddled with the selection cursor, and after pondering for a little, I chose a character that looked powerful and hard to control. The other side reacted in surprise.

“Hmm, Uehara-san, have you played this game before?”

“No, this is my first time. I just like the design of this character.”

“Ah... I see.”

Amano’s voice sound stupefied... and happy at the same time. I tilted my head, not sure what was the meaning behind his reaction. But the battle began immediately, and I concentrate on the game.

Amano had the posture of a gamer, and his control skills were much better than Aguri. He won't jerk the joystick about randomly like Aguri. However, that was why...

... Maybe he is weaker than Aguri...

People who input commands randomly was unexpectedly difficult to deal with in a fighting game. Even though they were not 'strong', but as they completely gave up on defense and psychological warfare, they could score quite a number of hits with their unorthodox attacks despite their stiff controls.

That's why, when talking about which type of players were the weakest, that would be...

Amano... You are really easy to read.

A player who knew the controls and used moves without any innovation was the easiest to defeat.

Amano was a classic example. His modus operandi was as follows:

- To confirm the move set, he would try to use each of them once.
- After learning simple projectile attacks, he would rely on them completely.
- If his attacks were blocked or dodged too many times, he would lose his composure and close in.
- He would close in by randomly jumping.
- And use only strong attacks, which would get blocked.
- Forget there were throw attacks for some reason.
- If counterattacked, he would panic and just keep defending.
- And naturally, he would get thrown.

- He would remember with a start that throws existed.
- And then try to forcefully throw his opponent, and get hammered in the process.
- When his hitpoints get very low, he would try to use super moves.
- Focus too much on the complicated input commands and miss the timing of using the moves.
- In the end, he lost to the simple move of jump light kick.

“Wah! U-Uehara-san, you are so strong!”

“You are the one who is too weak!”

I couldn't help retorting over the machine, this fellow's fighting scheme was too forthright! Even a grade schooler these days would be more cunning than him!

As Amano was groaning on the other side, the second round began. This game used a best of three system, it would be over if I win this match.

After seeing how weak Amano was in the first round, I gave him a bit of handicap and tried out some moves- And...

Huh, what is this move of his... Oh, it's a taunt?

This was a common design in recent fighting games. Taunts. It didn't have much meaning behind it, but it showcased the unique features of the various characters who made interesting moves.

I can't stand this, he isn't strong, but act so arrogantly... Alright.

I responded with a taunt of my own... However-

What, he used a second type of taunt against me? There are so many taunting moves in this game?

I looked at the sticker that showed the controls. At the corner, there was a small print about 'Taunt 2'... No no no, Amano, remembering this thing is too strange!

I was a bit stunned, but I still responded with taunt 2. I then heard Amano muttering from the other side of the machine...

"Amazing..."

"What's so amazing!? What exactly is your standards!? There isn't much time, I'm coming!"

"W-Wah! T-Take this, ultimate skill 'super defence'!"

"Wahh!"

My character who was throwing a light punch got thrown back! Amano seemed really pleased.

"This is the ultimate defensive skill that depletes the power gauge to reflect all attacks!"

"It is strong, but you used it at the completely wrong time!"

After lecturing Amano who wasted his entire power gauge, and even used my character's ultimate skill to finish him off in retaliation.

Amano yelled at the other side: "Uwah~~!" ... This fellow was usually quiet, but he showed huge reactions when playing games.

After finishing the match, as the winner, my character could continue with the story mode. It couldn't be helped since I won, so I will just play a little-

『Here comes a new challenger!』

"Why did you put in 100 yen!"

I roared as I peeked at the other side of the machine. Amano then looked my way sheepishly.

“Eh, no one is queuing anyway. It’s fun fighting with you, and before I knew it...”

“Hey, you are really...”

This guy was really head strong when gaming was involved. I sat back down in resignation.

Oh, so I can switch my character when a new challenger joins mid way. Alright...

It’s a good chance, so I changed my character and waiting for Amano. When the match started, Amano’s avatar wasn’t the main character anymore.

When he saw the character I was using, Amano looked surprised.

"Huh? Uehara-san, you switched your character."

"Yes. I was given the option to do that."

"But... You seemed to like the design of the previous character, and is getting used to the controls right? Is this fine?"

? What kind of question is this? Although I didn’t really get him, I still replied frankly:

“It’s more fun to try more characters right? You also changed your character.”

"..."

"Amano?"

“Ah, n-nothing! Nothing at all! J-Just that, it’s natural to want to try out other characters!”

“T-That’s true...”

What the hell. Amano’s voice sounded really chirpy. Did I say

something strange? Hmm-

And so we started our second match. Amano was weak as usual as he used strange moves he learned from somewhere that was not really practical... I felt that defeating me was a secondary objective to him.

With such an opponent before me, I had no intention to be too aggressive, and used all sorts of move sets in response.

Even though the match was retarded and low level...

... I never knew that playing games this way can be so interesting...

How I was at home aside, I had always acted seriously in arcades, but it didn't feel too bad having a match with Amano. I was used to playing with Aguri anyway, and I might uncover new things with such debauchery.

As I started playing around in the second match, it turned out really messy, and ended with Amano's victory. We were just a few steps away, but Amano still rushed to my side and looked at me with a blushed face:

"This is fun, Uehara-san!"

"Y-Yes... it's not too bad."

Even though I wasn't as excited as Amano, it was true that I had a blast, so I averted my eyes and answered him. Amano looked really blissful when he smiles.

Ah... That's his usual face that appears when class is out... That expression.

It was obvious how blissed he was. His face was more relaxed than I imagined... It was making me a little embarrassed.

I looked around me and asked Amano:

“What’s next, what shall we play?”

“Huh?”

“Ah.”

I only noticed I made a mistake after saying it. Damn it, why did I invite Amano to play some other game? He already achieved his goal... The environment of the arcade made me act in the same way I did when I was with Aguri. The relaxed smile of Amano being similar to Aguri was part of the reason.

To conceal my embarrassment, I continued:

“The... The result of the matches earlier is 1 - 1. That feels dissatisfying.”

“Hmm... R-Right! You are right! That’s it, Uehara-san!”

When I suggested having another match, Amano showed a smile that was happy from the bottom of his heart.

I can’t stand it... Why did someone who showed me such an expression rejected Tendo’s invitation?

As I was thinking about that, I realized that I hadn’t asked Amano the reason why he rejected the invitation to the Gamers Club.

But when I see Amano’s smile, it was hard for me to bring up that topic...

“Uehara-san! Why don’t we play that game next, that one!”

“That one... Hey, isn’t that a laser gun shooting game? There’s no versus mode!”

“Ah, right... Yes, but it looks like it would be fun for co-op, so let’s play it!”

“What logic is that-- Hey!”



Amano becomes a different person when games are involved, and I had no choice but to follow.

And so, I was dragged by the excited Amano all around the arcade for an hour.

“Alright, Uehara-san, what shall we play next!?”

I couldn't help glaring at Amano who was so full of energy after all this time.

“Hey Amano, you have been using a match with me as an excuse to play all the arcade games you want to try but couldn't because you are alone right?”

“Huh? N-No such thing.”

Amano averted his eyes and tried whistling even though he couldn't. I was dumbfounded, but didn't continue to resist and started browsing for the next game.

The truth was, I was having a blast playing games with Amano. His skills were bad, just a bit better than Aguri, but his reaction was interesting... He gave the impression that he was enjoying games from the bottom of his heart, even I was influenced by that aura of his.

And the strange thing was, after playing my heart out with Amano, I could subtly understand why he didn't join the Gamers Club.

How should I put this... Aguri and this guy... are both really pure.

What exactly made them turn out this way? To be frank, the two of them had very few things in common, but I could strangely feel that there was a similar 'essence' at their very core. But... I couldn't really grasp what that essence was. And... it was making my heart itch.

I looked at Amano who was walking around the arcade in a great mood.

In the past... I think I had... the same expression.

I couldn't recall when that was, and what I reacted to. But Amano's smile stirred my heart so much because I felt the same way in the past.

Amano seemed to have found a game, and tugged my sleeve.

"Uehara-san! Let's play that one next! Please!"

"Ah? Whatever, really now, which game is it-"

As I grumbled even though I wasn't really against it- I suddenly noticed the prominent figure of a beautiful blonde girl in my field of vision. I only saw the side of her face, but that was obviously the pride of our school, the school idol Tendo Karen. She was out of place in the arcade, and there were players who ended their games because they were staring at her... What was going on?

And from the way Tendo was looking around in search of something... To be frank, I got the gist of the situation, so I decided to tell Amano who had not noticed Tendo yet.

"Hey Amano, look over there-"

"Ah, Uehara-san."

"?"

Amano interjected with a nervous voice. I was wondering what was the matter and noticed he was looking behind me... At the entrance of the arcade. I followed Amano's gaze- and standing there was...

"Ah..."

A group in Otobuki uniform walked harmoniously into the arcade.

I took a look, and saw that they were the classmates who usually hangs out with me. The five of them were Daiki, Masaya, Shiyouji,

Mika and Reina.

My body stiffened on reflex. Thinking about it carefully, there was nothing to be ashamed of, I was just hanging out with my classmate Amano... But I couldn't stop my reaction in that instant.

However... that reaction was enough for a gloom to cover Amano's smile.

... Before the five of them took notice... Amano turned his back to me before I could say anything, and left with his head lowered.

"B-Bye, Uehara-san, thank you for today."

"Ughh... Hey!"

I wanted to stop Amano, but it was too late. He passed by my side, and went in the opposite direction from the five of them, heading briskly for the exit into the back alley.

Me, who could only watch him go in a daze; Amano who walked away before my eyes with a pained expression; And the beautiful blonde girl who couldn't speak to him in time.

As I stood there, looking at the exit Amano left from, the voice of Masaya and the others came from behind me.

"Yo, what a coincidence, Tasuku! We just finished Karaoke! At that place I told you about!"

"T-That's right... that one huh."

"Yup, that one! Their staff is just as bad today... Hmm? Oh right, where's Aguri? She isn't with you today?"

"Y-Yes, she is meeting someone else today..."

"I see. So you are playing here alone? What's wrong, why are you acting in such a lonesome way so lonesomely!?"

“Not really...”

I wanted to refute him, but everyone was laughing together with Masaya, so while my words were still caught in my mouth, Masaya kept talking to fill in the gap.

“Alright, anyway, we went to sing karaoke today too. And it ended just like last time-”

As I listened to him recount his boring karaoke adventure, several emotions twirled in my heart. Especially...

Why did that Amano... ran off all of a sudden...!

With self reproach, regret and anxiety all mixed together, my anxiety burst forth first.

I cut off Masaya.

“Sorry, I have something urgent! Bye!”

“Huh? Ah, I see. Bye?”

The group of five including Masaya were all stunned, and I passed by Tendo quickly, heading straight for the entrance where Amano left from. After coming out of the shop, I went to the back alley that had barely any pedestrian. I guessed the direction Amano would go if he was going home, and ran towards the residential zone with my bag in hand.

Damn it! What am I doing! Ridiculous! What am I thinking!?

I couldn't organize my feelings at all. Did I want to apologize to Amano? Vent my temper at him? Not just that, I didn't know if it was appropriate for me to chase after him without any plans.

But... I just didn't want to keep this suppressed emotions in my heart!

If I go on like this, I would become just like my middle school days!

Not able to squeeze out an ounce of courage, not daring to make friends, unable to tell my true wishes to my parents, just like that time!

I tripped and almost spilled a bucket in the restaurant, but I still dashed into a dark alley where there wasn't many pedestrians.

After sprinting for about a minute and reaching the corner of a building, I finally found the depressed back of my classmate.

"Amano!"

I couldn't hold back and dashed over with a shout. Amano trembled, then turned his head towards me timidly. When Amano saw me approaching with ragged breath, he tilted his head in confusion.

"Huh? Uehara-san? W-What's the matter?"

Amano also jogged towards me. I walked to his front, then kept quiet for a moment to regulate my breathing... Then I glared at him and asked:

"Why did you flee?"

"Huh? F-Flee? It's not that exaggerated..."

"You did flee."

Amano laughed sheepishly, but my attitude remained forceful. Amano's mood turned sour too, and he overtly showed an unhappy face.

Silence fell between us... a moment later...

Amano couldn't take it anymore and averted his gaze. He then said in a humble and gloomy tone, as if he was talking to himself:

"Well... It must be troubling to spend time with someone like me... And you are a normie..."

"---"

The instant I heard him say that, I grabbed Amano's shirt and pulled upwards.

A rage that could boil my blood was stemming from my guts.

I finally understood. What I thought of this fellow... This classmate...

I despised him to the point of feeling sick.

"Erm, ugh... What... are you... Uehara... san..."

Amano moaned painfully, but I didn't care, pulling his face close to mine.

The complicated emotions I had towards Amano-

I lashed it all out on him without any semblance of order.

"Stop your bullshit, you damn hikkikorimori virgin! Who do you think you are!? Saying things like normie! Don't use that word... Don't think you can brand everyone with a term like that! You understand!"

"What... are you... saying..."

The groaning Amano didn't seem to get what I was saying... Even I myself didn't get my own words. But once your emotions spill forth, it would gush out like a broken dam, and wouldn't stop before all of it had been emptied.

"If my life right now seem fulfilling, it's all thanks to the effort I put in! Because I used to be a bespectacled nerd, and only worked hard to change myself after entering high school! Your life is unfulfilling because of your own doing! Am I wrong!? At the very least, I don't think I should be branded with your discriminatory term like everyone else, Amano!"

"I am not... discriminating..."

"Don't you dare say you didn't! Listen up, you definitely thought 'instead of spending effort to build up pointless relationships, it is more meaningful to spend my days happily playing games', am I right!?"

"... T-That is..."

Amano's face turned a terrible shade of green, his blood wasn't flowing to his brain... but that was definitely not the reason why his face became like this.

I relaxed my right hand that was grabbing his chest, and continued:

"Yes, your idea isn't illogical. That's all that I can agree with you. Because I also have the thinking of having fun in the moment. However, my standard of entertainment is much higher than yours. Living my youth to the fullest means that you can call me a 'normie'. I have friends and a girlfriend. What about your high school life? You had no choice but to make the compromise that you will be happy just with video games."

"....."

As I spoke, I asked myself: Do I have any compromises in my high school life?... I couldn't answer, only irritation and frustration were welling up.

To shake all these aside, I focus my attention on Amano.

"... Hey Amano, you heard the children's tale about the ant and the grasshopper?"

".....?"

Amano appeared to waver slightly after I asked him that... But he still nodded, as I held on to his chest. I showed a twisted grin.

“I am the grasshopper in the story. By understanding the ways of the world and getting the main gist of it, I can have a fulfilling youth. If I run into major trouble, I just need to plead my head low and I will get to take advantage of others. Isn’t that wonderful?”

I worked hard every day in middle school, and only games gave me a little breather. But I didn’t achieve anything in the end, and I hated myself for that. Myself from back then was overlapping with the nerd before me.

"Amano, speaking of this, what about you!? Are games fun? Is that enough? Hey, isn’t your method of escapism too shabby!? That part of you... I find that part of you to be very annoying!”

The parts that resembled me greatly. Even though he was really similar to the past me... there were different parts too.

Amano groaned painfully.

"Even if you say this much...Uehara-san, you don’t really know me..."

"I know! I don’t need to ask too much about someone as shallow as you! Amano, you rejected the invitation that Tendo worked so hard to grant you right!? You had the chance to be a grasshopper without working for it... But you used the poor excuse of ‘differences in attitude towards gaming’ and gave it up! Even though you sounded as if you regretted it, but that’s not how you really think!... The truth is, you think you are cool for sticking to your haughty principles!”

“!T-That is...”

Amano’s eyes flickered. I carried on:

“That was the same reason you ran away before my clique! You are reveling in the image of a tragic main character you moulded for yourself! To me... That part of you is something I can’t tolerate!”

"....."



The sad gaze of Amano caught my eyes... It was like looking at my past self. I couldn't help getting too emotional.

"In the end, what is there to be serious about for stupid entertainment like gaming? How retarded. No matter how much you play, it won't benefit your real life one single bit. That's how gaming is... an absolute waste of time. It's true, if you see it from that angle, I can agree with your dissatisfaction with the Gamers Club. Wasting effort on useless things like fools. Tendo looks pretty, but her reputation is getting worse because of her weird moves recently-"

And so, I talked about anything that came to mind... The next instant.

"Ugh!"

- It was Amano's turn to grab me by the chest.

I looked at him, and Amano's eyes were... turned from the timid into the enraged.

Amano probably had a hard time too, but he still grabbed my chest and pulled up with all his might... and glared right back at me. I couldn't help feeling impressed by that.

Ho? So you can show such eyes too... And then? Why are so mad? Because I called you a bum who can only be envious? Because I told you the fact that rejecting Tendo's invitation was cool? Or...

I said these words because I had my conviction anyway. No matter how Amano refutes it, I had no intentions of giving in. And I didn't think I was wrong.

I couldn't wait for his rebuttal.

Amano's right hand that was grabbing me was shaking weakly, his eyes were tearing up... At the same time, he mustered his strength in his eyes and...

Amano who wanted to say his piece no matter what-

Finally started his rebuttal:

“Don’t look down on ants!”

“... Wut?”

Amano’s words were too unexpected, I even forgot to get angry as I stared at him blankly. As I unconsciously released my hold on Amano, he leaned into me.

“I-It’s true that I didn’t put in any effort, I’m just a no lifer whose only interest is gaming! I knew that from the start! That’s why I will not refute all that! I’m very sorry! Also, I’m sorry about calling you a normie. I think it’s wrong for me to say it like that! T-To be honest... Uehara-san, I only said all that because I can’t play with you! I am very sorry!”

“Huh? T-That’s right...?”

Amano was grabbing my chest, but he seemed to be agreeing with my criticism and apologizing to me... What was happening here?

Amano continued apologizing.

“Also, that thing about ‘rejecting Tendo-san looks cool’ really got me hard! I was only aware after you said that, it really surprised me! That’s right, I am really troubled! Also, also, I think I am really crazy for rejecting Tendo-san! I messed up the chance to make friends because of my strange pride, I really am the worst! So retarded! Something is wrong with my head!”

“I-I didn’t scold you that badly...”

As Amano continued speaking, his posture got lower than prostrating, so I couldn’t get angry.

I wondered what I should do next and scratched the back of my

head - At this moment, Amano lowered his head and voice.

".....Eh, if I take a hundred steps back, I can agree with your idea that gaming isn't beneficial. Yes... basically, it isn't useful at all. I know, but that is why I find it interesting... To be honest, I don't have the chips to refute you on the point that gaming isn't beneficial. I acknowledge that. But..."

Amano stopped here. He kept his head down, and a moment later... When he raised his head again, only his heightened determination was left in his eyes, as he looked straight into mine.

"But, I won't allow you to look down on the Gamers Club and Tendo-san when you are criticizing gaming!"

"!"

It was a little unexpected... but his refutation that had some properness about it made me speechless.

At this moment, Amano got to the core of the issue with a gentler face.

"Uehara-san, like you said, I think the grasshopper in 'The Ant and Grasshopper' is very smart. I am impressed with how well rounded he is, and frankly speaking, I am really envious of that kind of lifestyle. I actually wanted to be the grasshopper too. That is only natural. But... but..."

Amano's tone turned firm and sharp.

"No matter how smart the grasshopper is... he still don't have the rights to look down on the hardworking ant."

"! You..."

I was prepared and so confident.

However, I couldn't refute him at all.

Amano was on a roll, as he went all out on me who was gaping like a goldfish:

“It’s fine for you to call someone who takes it so easy a bum, and I think you are right. After being admonished by you, I realized again how bad I really am. Not even an ant, I didn’t even put in the effort, so I am just a flea. I don’t have a single bit of rights to lecture you. I am really sorry. But, even... even so!”

Amano who didn’t stutter at all at this moment moved me with his sincerity.

“Even though we are talking about games, such unbeneficial things! When you are criticizing me and games, you shouldn’t look down on those who put in their heart into one single thing... You shouldn’t criticize Tendo-san and the members of the Gamers Club!”

“... Ugh.”

Oh no, not only couldn’t I rebuke him, I completely agreed with what Amano said.

Correct. At the spur of the moment, I lashed out too hard at everyone, even though I was just feeling frustrated at Amano. Even if Amano gave in and accepted my criticism, I didn’t need to defame Tendo, the Gamers Club and games in general too.

As I was feeling dejected, Amano who was still grabbing my shirt showed a gentle face, and continued with a warm voice:

“Especially Tendo-san, she is a really nice person. She actually invited someone like me twice. It goes without saying that she is beautiful, she is gentle, can get things done and is talented in gaming. Even though Tendo-san is very smart, she went out of her way to study in Otobuki in order to join the Gamers Club. To me, someone like her is just like my first love- No, I mean someone worthy of respect. That is why, even though I accept your criticisms towards me...”

Amano paused momentarily, looked at me again and said:

“ I want you to take back your words about Tendo-san and the Gamers Club.”

Even though Amano appeared a little timid, his honest eyes were filled with even firmer conviction.

As Amano stared at me with such eyes... The sense of frustration I bore towards him that had been haunting my mind disappeared.

Ahh... What the hell, this guy... Is completely unlike the old me. Even more than the old me... No, even more than the current me, he...

I sighed and gently pushed away Amano's already loosened hand from my shirt. After patting at the crease, I apologized.

“... I was wrong. I apologize for saying those things about the Gamers Club and Tendo... Erm, and also... I feel the same for the things I said about you. All this... was just me picking a fight out of nowhere. Sorry about that.”

I bowed, and Amano waved his hands in a panic.

"Uehara-san... N-not at all! Not one bit! Everything you said about me is my fault!"

I was the one apologizing, but Amano lowered his head instead and turned fidgety... I can't stand him, this is really demotivating.

After my mood changed, I decided retort with a joke.

“But someone who rejected Tendo's invitation don't seem to be in the position to say anything for the Gamers Club.”

My words made Amano open his eyes wide. He then scratched his head with a blushing face.

“Ah, y-you're right! Eh... Well... Erm... T-That's...”

"...Fufu."

The sight of Amano scrambling to find an excuse made me laugh. When Amano saw that, he also laughed in relief... Eh, what the hell, it wasn't a big deal after clearing up the issue. Amano wasn't pretending to be mysterious or behaving strangely, he was just a normal classmate of mine. What was I so anxious about before this?

After laughing for awhile, I asked: "Then..."

"I'm heading back to the arcade, what about you, Amano? Why not join us..."

My suggestion out of the wish to atone and a little bit of consideration made Amano smile awkwardly.

"Well, that bar is too high for me. And I have games I want to play at home, so I will go home for the day."

"I see... Well then... Erm, see you at school."

"Ah... R-Right! See you at school!"

Even the normal farewell from a classmate made Amano smile from the bottom of his heart... Damn, I still couldn't get use to him, it was too cringey for me to look.

I turned and walked towards the arcade.

But a few steps later...

"Ah, right!"

I heard Amano's voice from behind and turned back. He was some distance away and seemed to remember something interesting, and was snickering.

I was a bit hesitant, but I still asked Amano why he was acting so weird, and he said with a smile:

"I am laughing about the meme of the Ant and the Grasshopper. Uehara-san, you came up with this metaphor after thinking for long, and talked about it arrogantly as if it was a grand idea. But it didn't fit at all."

"What the hell? Hey, are you cruising for a bruise?"

"Think about it yourself."

I was so embarrassed that I pulled up my sleeve and wanted to go after Amano, but he just smiled deviously... And told me the reason.

"In order to be with your friends and girlfriend, you have worked hard. That is the complete opposite of the grasshopper who indulged in the effort of others- Uehara-san, you are actually a super serious and cute ant."

"----"

I stopped moving. Amano dropped a 'bye' and left.

But I remained there dumbfounded. And then...

"...Ha, haha... I see, I am still an ant huh... Hahaha."

A strong urge to laugh well up, and I laughed out loud like Tiddy.

... The strange thing was, I felt the me from the middle school days was laughing along with me.

"... Alright, and next..."

After laughing for a while, I turned with the most comfortable mood in recent years, and went back the way I came. After about 10 metres, I turned at the corner of the building - And...

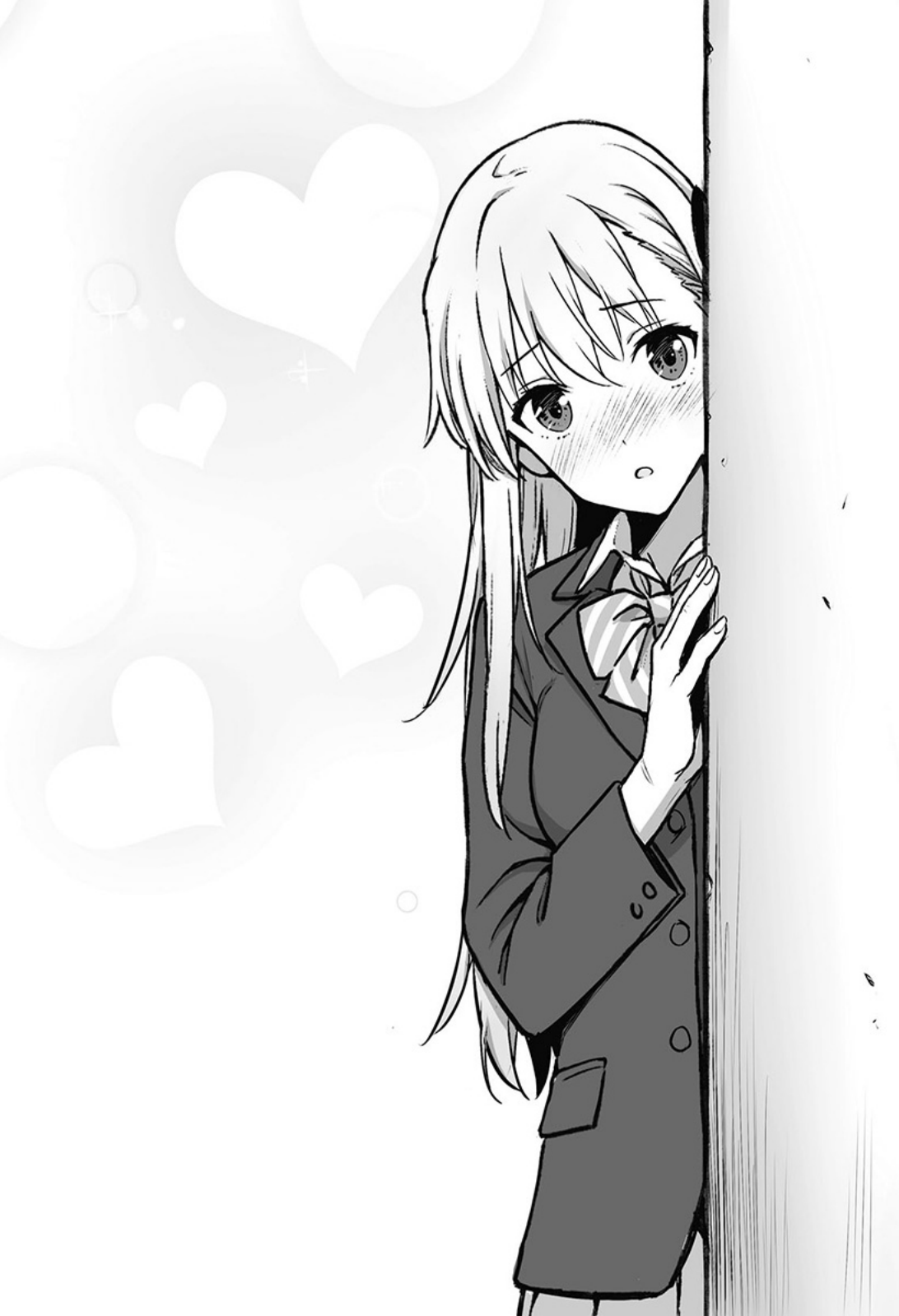
"....."

"..... (daze)"

“ ..... ”

... I ran into a blonde beauty hiding in the blind spot of the building -Tendo Karen. But she didn't even noticed that I was right beside her, as she looked at a certain direction with a dazed expression as if she caught a high fever.





I followed her gaze... And it seemed to be the direction Amano left in... Hmm.

Ahh~~ Oh no. I saw an incredible scene...

I immediately realized how 'serious' this was, and grabbed my nose.

After all... The way she looked... Anyone who saw her would...

Hey, our school idol has fallen completely in love...

A pure girl with a red face and sparkling eyes, watching a boy leaving was standing right there.

Tendo probably followed behind me to find Amano. Her objective was to persuade him to join the Gamers Club of course. However, she happened to witness my spat with Amano. And then...

She saw Amano, who rejected her invitation, caring so much for her and the Gamers Club, and became like this.

I never expected to see such a dramatic love story that was so obvious from a glance. Well, it wasn't that couples like me and Aguri was the norm, but in this day and age, love would happen in a plainer way. To think our school idol would be the exception from the norm...

I admired this rare scene for a moment, but I couldn't bear leaving the dazed Tendo in the dark alley and leave. So I went and spoke to her.

"Hey... Tendo?"

"...Huh!"

Tendo only came to her senses when I placed my hand on her shoulder. After recognizing me, she used her famed smart brains to understand her situation... She blushed immediately and shouted at me:

“I don’t have any special feelings for A-A-Amano-kun!”

A wild Tsundere in love has appeared! And she wasn’t aware about her feelings yet! ... How idiotic.

“Ah, right~ I get it~~ Congratulations~~”

After responding nonchalantly, I bowed and prepared to leave-

“W-Wait a minute!”

“Uwah.”

- My collar was grabbed all of a sudden. I choked and coughed.

But Tendo didn’t make any show of concern and continued:

“W-W-What did you mean by you get it? Why are you congratulating me...?”

“Cough cough... Ahh~~ ... Well, I think Amano and you are a good match.”

"What--"

Tendo’s face turned even redder, and was steaming like a boiling kettle of water. Okay, now’s my chance.

"Bye."

I waved and escaped in a hurry. Fortunately, Tendo didn’t chase me this time... Phew.

... I can now empathize with Amano, and understand why he didn’t look very happy about being chased by a stunningly beautiful girl. That girl is really troublesome, more so than Aguri in some ways.

I slowly walked towards the arcade with my arms crossed in silence.

And so, I decided on something when I reached the arcade.

Alright, I will do all I can to bring them together, and tease Amano along the way!

- I had another new entertainment in my fulfilling high school life.

"Ah, Tasuku~~!"

"Hmm? Aguri?"

After parting ways with Amano, I went back to the arcade and chat idly with Masaya and the others. Just when I felt it was time to split, Aguri suddenly came. I was surprised, she then took my arm and explained:

"I finished meeting my friends, and was wondering if you would be here!"

"Ah... Right."

Even though the teasing eyes of Masaya and the others made me feel awkward, I still answered reluctantly... The instinct of women scared me sometimes. I didn't have any experience in affairs, but I caught a gist of how terrifying it would be in the future.

Aguri joined the conversation for a while, but it was getting late, so Masaya and the others went home a short while later.

As for me... Aguri pleaded with me to 'play one game! Just once okay!', and was dragged to the crane game machine by her.

I felt unmotivated.

"Spare me... Just how much money did you think I was forced to spend in the arcade today..."

"Hmm~~? What, did you catch a plushie for someone other than me?"

Aguri puffed her cheeks suddenly... Huh? It was rare seeing her look jealous. After all, she could say something like Tendo and me being compatible so casually. Hmm?

I felt a little hesitant, but I still took one hundred yen from my wallet and explained:

“No such thing, I was just wandering around the arcade and playing games at random with some guy.”

When Aguri heard what I said, she exclaimed ‘huh~~!’ and reacted as if it was a pity.

“I want to see! I want to see Tasuku play all sort of games!”

“Huh? Aren’t you always watching? Why are you saying that now...”

I inserted the hundred yen coin into the crane game machine... but Aguri was still angry.

“Ughh~~ ... You played games... with someone other than me...”

... She’s in a bad mood today.

That’s a rare sight. Aguri usually smiles all the time, and didn’t think of anything like an idiot.

... But that’s true, my emotional ups and downs when I was with Amano might be wider than when I was with my girlfriend Aguri. Thinking from this perspective, I could sort of understand why she was jealous, but I didn’t explain the situation in so much detail.

Frankly speaking... Why am I dating Aguri...?

I don’t dislike Aguri, and find her to be cute... But was that enough? I had absolutely no intention of getting into BL, but after the emotional fight with someone who was just a classmate, I felt a bit weird that I didn’t tell my girlfriend about this.

I inspected the crane game machine. Aguri probably wanted another version of the weird cat I got her the other day. I planned to use the tag hooking trick, but I had to be careful.

As I checked the machine... I had some time on time, and tried asking Aguri:

“Hey, Aguri.”

“What is it~~ adulterous Tasuku?”

She was still angry. Did she take the wrong medicine today? I couldn't care less, and continued:

“I want to ask... Just what did you see in me, that prompted you to confess to me?”

“Huh?”

Aguri seemed to have forgotten about being angry and stood there in a daze. Oh right, this might be the first time I talked about this. I was a bit bothered when we started dating, but I felt embarrassed about raising this topic myself. When we got to know each other, we were too casual about it, and I lost interest in asking about this.

After devising the plan to catch the plushie, I started pressing the controls carefully. First would be the vertical axis.

“The reason I fell for you? Hmm, I never told you?”

“That's right.”

Alright, the vertical axis was just as I wanted, next would be the horizontal axis...

I sneaked a peek at Aguri... She didn't seem to be thinking as usual, and just like Amano who was playing games earlier, she had a dumb smile on her face. Her mood seemed to have recovered after talking about love... What a simple girl. She probably fell for me because my

looks suit her taste anyway.

I shift my focus back to the crane machine, and thumbed the horizontal axis button gently.

“I fell for you because you are cool!”

See? In the end, it was all thanks to me changing my image and making it into the high school social scene. Looking at it this way, it was proof that my efforts was worth it...

I was happy that my prediction was on point, and felt disappointed in some sense. I pressed down on the button to move the mechanical arm... Alright, just a bit more, and it will be right above the target-

“Because back in middle school, you were really cool when you helped me catch a plushie!”

The arm completely pass over the plushie and moved to the side. Aguri protested: “Ah~~ What are you doing, Tasuku!”

As for me, I felt nothing about wasting a hundred yen, and looked at Aguri blankly.

Aguri lectured me angrily for being useless, but I just asked her in a mutter:

“You and me... Did we met in middle school?”

When Aguri heard my question, she turned her gaze to the crane machine, and answered vexingly and nonchalantly:

“We did. Ah, back then, I had black hair, braids and wore round frame glasses, a plain girl completely different from now! But you also changed, so we are the same!”

“Hmm... Hmm?”

A plain girl with black braids? I... helped her caught a plushie?

Right... Now that she mentioned it...

That's right, I think such a thing did happen. In the summer of my third year in middle school. In order to get away from the pressure of preparing for entrance exams, I ended up playing crane games somehow, and caught a plushie... But if I brought something of that size home and my mother found out, I would get in trouble. I was worrying about it when I saw a plain and cute girl who was obviously not used to the arcade staring at that plushie. And so I...

Aguri turned back to look at me, and continued with a smile:

“Since that day I have always~~ liked you. After that, I will visit this arcade to look for you every now and then. When you occasionally visit this arcade, you would focus on playing one game, and then go home. I like the way you were the most.”

Aguri said it in a relaxed manner. However, I was the opposite of her, my brain felt as if it was knocked heavily.

After all... After all, this girl... the one Aguri likes... is not the me right now...

“I knew we entered the same high school, but you became so cool when I visited your class. I then asked my friends, and heard that your preference leans towards frivolous girls... So I worked hard to change my image. Ah, but I really like the way I am now anyway.”

Hehe- Aguri was still smiling like an idiot.





Her smile made me... made me-

- For some reason, I felt very ashamed, and couldn't look at her directly!

My heart was pounding so fast! I covered my mouth with my hand, and averted my gaze from Aguri. But I couldn't shake away the image of her smile from my mind!

What is this? What is this! Why am I so nervous about a girl like Aguri, that my heart is on the verge of exploding...!? S-She had her eyes on me since middle school? She liked me... since that time? She fell for the real me? ... A-Aguri would do that?

"Tasuku? What's wrong~~?"

Aguri asked as I fell into a daze. I sneaked a peek at her.

... It is gripping my heart!

Oh no, what is going on? W-W-Was Aguri's face that lovely!?

I didn't understand how I interacted with her in the past.

In order to escape from Aguri, I had to leave this place.

"T-That's enough for today! Y-You should go home early today!"

"Huh~~! Tasuku, aren't you going to see me home?"

"Y-Your place faces the shopping district, it is not dangerous at all even if you walk back at night! Bye!"

I turned my back towards Aguri's unhappy voice, and left the scene hastily. I walked on the street briskly, trying to cool my burning cheeks.

- I walked like this for some time. On a whim, I looked at the reflection of myself on a shop's glass window, and...

... Ugh.

A figure who looked dazed with blushing cheeks stared back at me, just like Tendo earlier-

In other words, that was a reflection of a pure youth who had fallen deeply in love.

After the turmoil on Friday, Saturday and Sunday went by and it was the morning of Monday.

Because of various reasons, I went to school with dark circles under my eye and waltzed lazily into Class 2F. Masaya and the others greeted me energetically: "Morning!"

I stifled a yawn and replied: "Morning~~" went to my seat and placed my bag on my desk.

- I then cast my gaze to the corner of the class, locking eyes with Amano who was playing a portable game console.

I hesitated momentarily about what to do, and that guy seemed to be worrying about me unnecessary, and shifted his eyes back onto his console. I got mad when I saw Amano act that way.

... Alright, I decided.

Shiyouji was about to move away from my seat as usual, but I stopped him... And then, under the confused gaze from the five of them, I walked towards Amano. Not just Masaya and the others, the entire class was watching my strange move... And so, I placed my hand onto Amano's desk a little forcefully.

Amano looked up in surprised, then removed the earpiece connected to his console. I said to him with a smile:

“Yo, morning Amano.”

“Morn... Morning, Uehara-san.”

At this moment, Amano seemed to realized the reason why I was unhappy, and smiled awkwardly with an “Aha...” as he scratched his face.

“B-But for me to greet you out of the blue cheerfully... will be weird right? I have my image too...”

“... Sigh.”

I sat on the back of the empty chair before Amano and answered: “That’s true.”

“It’s true that It will feel unnerving if you greet me jovially.”

“How mean!”

Amano looked as if that was a heavy blow. In fact, Masaya and the others were watching my interaction with Amano a little waveringly, and the atmosphere in class seemed to be affected too.

Sigh, can’t be helped.

Even I became like this after Tendo’s visit, it couldn’t be helped for Amano to be in the spotlight. I felt awkward and thought I did something I shouldn’t have, but Amano showed me a wildly happy smile.

"But thank you, Uehara-san. I was really happy that you were willing to play games together with me!"

" ....."

I felt a sense of salvation from his pure, Aguri-like smile.

At this moment I seemed to understand the common point between the two of them.

For them... the thing they love deeply is right beside them.

Amano has games; while Aguri has...

"? What's the matter, Uehara-san? Your face is really red."

"N-Nothing! F-Forget that, I have something to ask you..."

"Huh? Ah, okay? W-What's the matter...?"

Amano straightened his back a little nervously... He probably thought I will say something serious again... That made it hard for me to say it out too.

I turned silent for a moment... Staying like this won't do either, so I made up my mind to ask Amano:

"... I can't clear the Paradigm of Fantasia's chapter 5 boss..."

"Hmm... Ah, I see!"

I glanced at Amano from the corner of my eye. He was all smiles... unbelievably bright. Amano leaned his entire body forward.

"You can't win by using normal method at that part!"

"So the story is scripted to lose? Eh, the game ends normally after I lose though..."

"No, not that, you can't win if you don't use the moves in the correct sequence."

"Hmm?... Ah, I get it! The story did mention that a little!"

I couldn't help placing my hands onto the table. Oh no, I want to try it out soon! Basically, this is an RPG I had been staying up at night to play! After finding out the way to clear the level, I didn't feel like attending classes anymore.

Amano was smiling very happily.

“That was hard to decipher. Actually, I was forced to check the online guides too.”

“Ah~~ I thought about checking it online, but I feel that I would lose if I did. I won’t feel hesitant if I check it once... but this is my first playthrough.”

“Yes, I know! You will be spoiled if you check the guide in some places!”

“That’s right! Even though the story wasn’t mentioned, there are cases where the name of the dungeon itself is a spoiler!”

“Exactly! I really wish the guide writers will be more considerate, although the ones reading it are partly to blame too. Basically, there are times when you come across spoilers in the midst of searching for the guides to clear the level.”

“There is! For example, searching the terms online and you got the results of ‘character name + betray’!”

“That happens too often!”

Amano and I had a blast talking about video games. However, when we noticed that our classmates were getting a bit rowdy, we cleared our throats a bit shyly... Hmm, strange?

" ....."

I turned to the side, and there was a beautiful blonde girl leaning into the classroom and watching us. She was gritting her teeth vexingly as she looked our way.

Haha~~ Tendo probably gave up on inviting Amano to join the Gamers Club, and naturally thought from a high position: “Shouldn’t I chat with Amano who didn’t have any friends about games?” And when she reached the classroom, the position of ‘game chatter’ had been taken by me, that’s probably it... Our school idol is really interesting.

"? Uehara-san, what's the matter?"

"Ah, it's nothing, Tendo is here again..."

"Huh?"

Amano looked at the classroom entrance after I told him that. Tendo left in a panic, and Amano stood there dazed.

"Eh... W-What was that just now? Could it be... Tendo really hates me?"

Seemed like he was still concerned about rejecting the Gamer Club's invitation. I couldn't help snickering, and Amano looked at me with his head tilted.

"Eh, it's nothing. I think both of you are very interesting."

"N-Not at all! You are actually taking pleasure over my misfortune! I made Tendo-san mad, I-I have to apologize to her..."

Ara, that won't do. I had to... I had to make things more interesting!

"Ah, no need no need, ignore Tendo. Just leave her alone before she find you to talk on her own."

"Uehara-san, are you being especially strict towards her all of a sudden?"

"Huh? No, rather than me being strict, it will be more effective to make her a bit more anxious..."

"A-Anxious? Effective?"

Amano was still confused. I laughed quietly and stood up.

"Eh, don't mind that. Well... Bye, Amano."

"Ah, right. Bye bye, Uehara-san."

After Amano sent me off with a smile, he turned back to his game console happily again.

.....

“Ah... Eh~~ Hey, Amano...”

“? Hmm? What is it, Uehara-san?”

With my back to Amano, I rubbed my neck and said as if I just thought of something.

... Actually, this was the thing I really wanted to talk about... But it was really embarrassing.

After a moment of silence... In order to not let Amano realize this was the main issue, I asked quietly:

“Can I ask you things about games next time?”

“Hmm...”

I turned my head a little to peek at him. And... Amano showed an absolutely blissful smile, similar to the one he had when he was playing games earlier, and then nodded firmly.

“Yes! I welcome that warmly! Let’s chat next time, Uehara-san!”

“... Okay.”

With a wave, I returned to Masaya and the others... In the end, we were still the same as usual. I spent my time noisily in the center of the class, Amano still played games by himself in a corner of the room, our relationship was awkward, not even friends. Aguri was my girlfriend, that part had never changed.

The same for games, I didn’t give it any exceptional evaluation. In my heart, my interaction with friends and other entertainment still had far higher priority than games. Amano and I were different.



... However--

“? Tasuku, what’s with you?”

“Huh? What are you asking?”

When we were chatting as usual, Daiki asked me all of a sudden.

He was usually quick witted in some places, but he was looking at me baffledly right now.

“Eh, you seemed to be a good mood today. Did something good happen?”

“Good? No, nothing great... Ah.”

“Something came to mind?”

“Yes, I got it. Even though it is just a trivial matter.”

“? What happened?”

Daiki asked with his head tilted, and...

I replied shyly:

“I have been thinking recently that games are pretty interesting.”

# Chapter 3 - Hoshinomori Chiaki and Proximity Connection

“Uwah... Amazing.”

I couldn't help praising it as I fiddled with the control pad connected to my computer.

The game on the screen... Wasn't the latest cutting edge AAA grade games.

By using existing art work and traditional RPG structure, the game was presented in nostalgic bitmap art, that reminds me of indie games made during the Super Famicom era.

Which was known as free games.

They are games created by hobbyist and distributed free of charge online. I was playing an adventure game made by the most popular RPG maker software.

Although the graphics were constructed using the RPG software, the game didn't have any battles or character growth elements. It was a pure exploration, puzzle solving and storytelling game from start to finish. Commonly seen amongst free games. That was the reason the quality varies greatly, but if you ask me about the quality of the game I was playing--

“Eh... I need to use this here?”

I controlled the main character, little girl, and chose the 'key of death' I just got from the item selection box to enter the new room, 'room of poison'-- And what appeared before me was a wall full of faces, all of them squirming about as they groaned in an unknown language.

“... Woah, the creator is sick in the head as usual...”

I gulped. By the way, ‘sick in the head’ is my way of complimenting him.

Actually, this game... Or rather, this creator always made games that were hard to understand. After playing midway, the storyline was normal, there were no obvious programming errors or typos, and the game was made really carefully... Unfortunately, there were too many ‘super developments’.

The super development wasn’t natural too, it was so bizarre that the player would feel they were playing another game midway. I thought the creator would explain in detail later, but he just tossed all the earlier storyline away, which makes me wonder what the point of all that was.

It was impossible for such a game to be popular; since, the games made by this creator were too niche. However, the second game he made was much more docile, without any strange super development, and the ending was unexpectedly normal. That’s why it made it into the popularity rankings of free games in no time. I only learned about this creator through that game...

Aside from the second game, without exception, his other works were... putting it nicely, unique; putting it not so nicely--

“I don’t get what the content is saying.”

It could only be described in such a way, as if someone’s nightmare was being visualized.

But such games also had their blind following among the open-minded world of free gaming... How should I put this? I don’t think the works of this person were that ‘outstanding’.

His style always follows a set route: ‘The story starts out interesting, turns into shambles because of the super development, and proceeds into the ending in a mess.’ There was nothing ‘deep’ about the super

development either, so you can't really talk about it with others.

A work that combined the four elements of no climax, no ending, no meaning, and no taste. (I coined the term '4chan' for this.) This was the style of this creator- 'NOBE'.

But somehow, I like the games made by 'NOBE'.

I couldn't really answer properly even if you ask me why. The flaws I mentioned earlier bother me and the super development would make me retort: "Hey hey hey..." I probably agree more with the negative comments.

But even so, I still look forward to new works by 'NOBE'.

As I thought blankly about the creator while I explored the 'room of poison', the faces on the wall started speaking.

"The adverts by the mobile service provider do not get to the point though." "The ice cream looks delicious, but they can do away with the song." "Why do they want to film a live action version so much?" "I can't accept a generic comment which includes a discount code as a product review." "It's a little too late to release a huge DLC now." "The trend of jacking up the prices by adding the words 'limited edition'." "Physical ability and talent are two different things." "Oh, so 'this game enhanced the internet communication functions' huh?" "No matter how I look at it, it's your own fault that you are not popular."

"So the poison in the 'room of poison' refers to a venomous tongue!"

I retorted to the screen, and a smile appeared on my face.

That's right, it was this kind of feeling. I couldn't explain it clearly, but this was why I always have a smile on my face when I play the games by this creator.

This was different from it being funny because the game sucks too much. If I could appraise it more directly, I feel that the games made

by this person... his worldview feels very comfortable to me.

Like his choice of words for the game messages, his taste in picking pictures, way he uses the music, all these trivial things. All these elements suit my taste perfectly.

The occasional glimpse into his personality I get when his developer blog refreshes also resonated with me. It even surprised me that there is someone with such compatible sensibilities as me.

I was definitely drawn to the 'personality' part of the creator.

That might be so, I didn't know his age or gender. This was normal on the internet, but from how vague the creator was on his private life, he must have taken extra care to protect his privacy. The only thing that was clear was his internet handle 'NOBE'.

And of course, I didn't interact with the creator either. I would leave my comments about his latest release on his blog (basically compliments) or express my agreement with the passages posted on the blog. Even so, I had never received any response. But I like the icy attitude of 'NOBE' too, a true die hard fan.

"Erm, next will be... this way?"

After exploring the entire 'room of poison', I made the main character enter the next room, which was the bottom of the sea for some reason... Although I was exploring a mansion and there wasn't any mention of me entering a tunnel, a room in the bottom of the sea suddenly popped up.

I was stunned, but still explored the surroundings--

-- The next moment, a giant jelly fish suddenly appeared and killed the main character by eating her!

"Huh?"

The unreasonable situation made me froze momentarily, but such

deadly traps were common in games made by this creator, so there wasn't any need to panic. I just need to reload an earlier save file. So I waited quietly for the screen prompt to appear... But after waiting for so long, the game over message still didn't appear, and only the jellyfish that ate the main character remained on the middle of the screen.

"....."

Thinking 'it can't be', I timidly press the left button on the directional pad, and--

-- The giant jellyfish moved one step to the left.

"Can the main character be switched in such a way!?"

Even a die hard fan like me couldn't help roaring at the screen. Immediately after that, the worried voice of my younger brother came from next door: "B-Bro, what's the matter?"

I answered: "I-It's nothing." and turned my gaze back to the game screen.

To confirm, I pressed up down left right on the directional pad. The Jellyfish moved according to my input commands.

I looked at the screen dumbfoundedly for a moment, but a smile returned to my face quickly, and I continued playing.

As I continued controlling the jellyfish and played the game... I muttered subconsciously:

"Really, just what kind of person... is 'NOBE'..."

And of course, I was aware that many people had different personality or remain anonymous.

But even so, I was still very interested in this person 'NOBE'.

"Hey Amano! That game made by 'NOBE' is incredibly

nonsensical!”

On a certain morning, Uehara-kun who ran into the classroom didn't go to his seat, and headed straight for me. The first thing he did was complain to me loudly.

I tried greeting him with a cool smile, but Uehara-kun didn't even acknowledged me, and approached with a fierce attitude that made the other classmates cringe.

“I trusted you because you recommended it! During the starting ‘mystery exploration’ segment, I was looking forward to it when I saw all the puzzles and foreshadowing!”

“Yes, the beginning is interesting.”

“That's right! Not just that, when the super development happened midway and changed into a ‘fishing game’, I was shakened, but still played on patiently by telling myself ‘Well, Amano recommended it, so the story will be make sense in the latter half, and lead to a touching ending...’!”

“Woah. Uehara-kun, I think your personality of not giving up immediately is great.”

I tried soothing him with compliments, but it was not effective. Uehara-kun said with a trembling fist: “In the end... In the end...” He then slammed it onto my table with a bang, and roared with tears in his eyes:

“Why is the ending an arrogant bearded old man taking a picture with a huge black bass!? What the hell! What happened to the haunted mansion in the first half of the story!?”

“Ara~~ Isn't that interesting?”

“What's interesting about that!? Your taste is too weird! That is just a trash game!”

“Yup, probably.”

I answered honestly, and Uehara-kun grabbed his head and squirmed.

“You actually agreed! Then why recommend it to me!? Out of ill will? You wish ill on me!?”

“How can that be! A tenth of it is out of goodwill!”

“So ill will is nine-tenths!? Damn it, compensate me! Give me back the time I spent on that lousy game all night at the expense of passing on watching ‘Ame Talk’<sup>[1]</sup>!”

“Ah, their segment on ‘Celebrities that love gaming’ last night was super interesting.”

“So you did watch that!”

Uehara-kun strangled me...Sigh, how blissful. I had resigned myself to a dull campus life, but I actually get to experience such friends-like interaction, this was like a dream... Like a dream... there’s a large patch of flowers around me... Hmm, isn’t that my great grandmother I had only seen on photographs--

“Ughh, you are strangling me too seriously!”

I hurriedly shook away Uehara-kun’s hands. He answered me with a face of rage: “I am really mad!” I-I see. So he really was angry. Oh no, I had completely forgotten about how to gauge the distance between friends.

I apologized to Uehara-kun depressedly.

“I-I am sorry. Erm, there was a 90 percent chance that this game wouldn’t suit you, but I carelessly... hoped that you might like it.”

“Huh?? Ah... In the end, this incident started because I asked you whether ‘you have any games only insiders would recommend’... My



bad, I overreacted.”

Uehara-kun scratched his head as he said that, then sat down in the seat in front of me. I placed my phone onto the table and apologized once again: “I am sorry.”

Uehara-kun sighed and said: “It’s fine.” But he immediately followed up with: “But...”

“I don’t get why you find this thing charming at all.”

“Ah~~ ... well maybe...”

I didn’t refute. The truth was, aside from the internet, I had never met anyone else who praises the work of ‘NOBE’.

I answered with a wry smile:

“Eh, but I do feel that game is really bad.”

“Isn’t that right? Basically, your taste in games isn’t too different from me. In fact, the stuff you recommended earlier were all really interesting, that’s why I trusted your judgement so much.”

“Thank you.”

Hearing someone say that was the most blissful thing for video gamers. However, Uehara-kun put his elbow on my table and rolled his eyes.

“And that’s why I don’t understand why you recommended that. It feels like a prank.”

“Ah~~... you are right...”

“Ugh, hey hey, aren’t you going to deny it?”

Seemed like Uehara-kun wanted to debate me but got blindsided. I scratched my cheeks.

“Ehh~~ ... Well, I don't have any excuse. How should I put this, the charm of that game can't be explained with words. Putting it more arrogantly, those who don't understand won't, it's just like one's taste in food.”

“Food huh... If I have to say, this isn't a matter of like or dislike, it is dubious whether the thing is actually food. It can't be called a game.”

“Maybe. But I like this.”

“... You like bearded old men fishing for black bass?”

“Not that. What I like is the details within the game, or its worldview.”

“I don't get you...”

After saying that, Uehara-kun leaned onto the chair's back, rocking the chair on its hind legs as he crossed his arms behind his head...To be honest, I couldn't explain further. If I had to use a great example I haven't used before...

With a laugh, I put up a cool front and said:

“That's right, Uehara-kun, this is something like love, and can't be explained with reasons.”

“... What the hell is a cherry boy like you saying to a guy with a girlfriend?”

“Ugh.”

Amano Keita's heart suffered a billion points of damage! My face turned red with shame!

“T-That's not the point! I am talking purely about spiritual connection! M-Maybe you and your girlfriend already have... erm, a more intimate connection.”

“Ahh?”

“Hmm?”

For some reason, my words stunned Uehara-kun... a moment later, the redness of his face could even rival mine. Uehara-kun then averted his gaze... Could it be...

“Erm... Uehara-kun, I remember you had been dating with your girlfriend for almost half a year...”

“Ah, that’s right! Spiritual connection is important! Yes, that is everything!”

"....."

Strange? Could it be, Uehara-kun appeared to be very frivolous, but was unexpectedly--

“E-Enough about me, what about you? You!”

Uehara-kun suddenly accused me to conceal his embarrassment. I tilted my head.

“Me? Well, I told you I didn’t interact with ‘NOBE’ at all...”

“Who’s asking you about that! I mean you and Tendo, Tendo!”

He mentioned an unexpected name, which made me tilt my head blankly.

"Tendo-san? Hmm? What about Tendo-san? If you are asking about my interaction with the Gamers Club, I will greet Misumi-san when I meet him on the corridor by chance, or chat with him a little...”

I didn’t meet the upperclassmen since then, much less Tendo-san who was from a completely different realm...

"Tendo-san and I don’t have anything in common to the point of being depressing."

I replied in a tone insinuating: ‘What’s the point of asking this now?’ Uehara-kun showed a stupefied expression for some reason.

“Are you... serious?”

“Hmm? I am serious... Or do you want me to confess and get dumped?”

“Eh, I don’t mean that... After that time, you didn’t see Tendo around much?”

“? Yes, that’s right. There are times when I saw her one sidedly, but the thing is, we interacted in the past, so I got better at noticing her from the corner of my eye. Sigh~~... Am I really sissy for acting this way?”

I realized how disgusting I was, and felt a little depressed. Maybe I still had lingering feelings for Tendo-san, or held on to some hope. People with chunnibyout were really troublesome.

When I smiled with a hint of guilt, Uehara-kun looked even more stupefied.

“You... You aren’t dense, but your self esteem is too low, and a bit off in your taste.”

“? Off? Ehh... Ah, you mean my views on the games made by ‘NOBE’?”

“No, not that, I mean Tendo... Forget it. It’s funny that way too. But you have to be careful about drifting too far apart, and losing the hook.”

“? Drifting too far apart? Ah, it’s fine, you might not know since you laid off gaming for a while. The effect distance for proximity connection for the 3DS is further than expected.”

“... Is that so.”

Uehara-kun answered disinterestedly... What's going on? I felt our dialogue was out of sync. Was this the gulf between nerd game players and normies?

-- At this moment, I suddenly noticed a request for aid from my mobile phone. After notifying Uehara-kun, I checked and found a message from 'MONO'. I wanted to clear the quest while chatting with Uehara-kun, but found him peering at the phone screen.

"Ah, Uehara-kun, are you interested? I can send an invite--"

"Well, not really. I'm interested about the person on the other end... What's the name again? One of the reason you rejected Tendo's invitation..."

"Hmm? Ah, you mean 'MONO'?"

"Yes. Connecting spiritually with someone you don't know the face or background of, don't it have the feeling of destiny about it?"

I didn't imagine Uehara-kun to be have such romantic ideology.

"It would be great if the other party is a beautiful young girl. Sigh, but I won't mind even if 'MONO' is a old man."

"Huh... Could it be your preference is..."

Uehara-kun backed away as if that was true. I hurriedly explained:

"N-No, that's wrong! I just think that if we can chat about games happily, then the gender of the other party wouldn't matter... Or rather, I have less reservation when talking with guys."

"Oh... I see... You really think of gaming as your everything..."

"Not at all. I often think: 'will a pretty girl fall from the sky?'"

"Your taste lean too much towards gaming."

"That might be so, but I don't have the determination to grind the

stats like in gal games though! I will just hope for blessings falling from the sky, and that the other party will like me unconditionally!”

“That’s too depraved!”

Uehara-kun sighed with a stupefied expression, then stared blankly at my phone screen. After I finished the help quest, then asked:

“... Oh right, why did you pick your internet handle to be ‘Tsucchi’? Since your family name is Amano, I thought you will pick something like ‘Rain’.”

After hearing his question, I answered while thinking that it is rather embarrassing for someone to watch me play social games:

“To be honest, I will name the hero Rain or Keita when I play RPGs. But I prefer distancing myself for internet handles...”

“Ah~~ I feel you.”

“And so, I used my mother’s family name ‘Tsuchiyama’ and chose the handle ‘Tsucchi’. On the other hand, my internet alias is ‘Yama-san’.”

“Oh~~... It is hard to make conversation if you use such a reason. Boring.”

“Who cares!”

Uehara-kun sighed in resignation again. And then...

“Looks like you need rehabilitation before I can use your love comedy as entertainment.”

“What are you saying? Love comedy? Rehabilitation?”

What’s the link? I blinked blankly, and Uehara-kun looked at me with serious eyes.

“Think carefully about it, Tendo is too high a bar even for me.

Under such a situation, the current you... Even if Tendo is willing to take the initiative, it will end in no time with such a huge imbalance. You are... too weak."

"Yes, I don't know what you are talking about, but it's clear you want a fight. Uehara-kun, let's take it outside for a round of Mario Party!"

"Your way of picking a fight is too gentle! Sigh, Amano, calm down, you are mistaken. I just want to tell you... Compared to Tendo, you are lower than a lice."

"Yup, that's no different from what I thought you are trying to do! Let's Mario P--"

"Huh? Or you think you are compatible with Tendo?"

"Ah, sorry. Compared with Tendo, I am worse than lice."

I was devastated that the first friend I made put such a cruel fact before me. Only now did Uehara-kun start to ease the atmosphere.

"Eh, I am not trying to make you depressed. Like I said, I want to help you rehabilitate... In other words, salvage you from the situation of being a loner."

"Huh!? So you are going to finally introduce your girlfriend and friends to me--"

"....."

I could see that Uehara-kun awkwardly averted his gaze...

He cleared his throat and continued:

"N-Not really, that bar is still too high for you right now."

"Eh, you have a point."

I was actually half joking. I couldn't imagine myself chatting

happily inside Uehara-kun's circle of friends. I think that interpersonal relations require effort from both parties, but feeling strained and exhausted from being friends felt wrong too.

But in that case, what does Uehara-kun want me to do?

I couldn't figure it out... Uehara-kun smiled at me deviously, and nonchalantly stated his idea.

"Amano, try chatting up a game enthusiast and quiet-- 'girl!'"

"....."

The ideas from normies were too horrifying, which made me shiver with a headache.

"Alright Amano, the target is Class A's 'Hoshinomori Chiaki'. She seems to be the same type as you, a loner nerd girl who likes video games."

After school. When class was over, Uehara-kun who got information about girls through his network came to my seat.

I glared at him with an obvious show of displeasure.

"Like I said this morning, I don't want that, this is like picking up girls..."

But Uehara-kun didn't back down and glared back at me with a straight face.

"Hey hey hey, what are you saying? Anyone who wants to make friends has to start by talking to complete strangers. It's a given it will be somewhat like picking up girls."

"T-That might be so... b-but even then, why must it be a girl!"

"Huh? The final objective is obviously for you and Tendo--"

Uehara-kun seemed to realize something and scratched his head at



this point.

"Ah~~... No, I remember now. For guys, you already know the gamer Misumi right? And you have no problem talking with me."

"That... That is true."

But to be honest, I was still quite distanced from Misumi-san to call him a 'friend'. We only chat when we meet occasionally, and wasn't that close to make the effort to keep in touch.

But Uehara-kun didn't know about that awkward gap, and started persuading me:

"Think about it, if you keep grinding the same type of enemy in a RPG, the experience points will dip right? It's the same for this. Amano, you need to challenge a new enemy so you can grow rapidly."

"Somehow, I feel your arrogant face is trying to say: 'good good, I made a perfect example by using the concept of RPG for Amano who loves gaming.' It feels irritating."

"Why are you so acute when it is about your inferiority complex!? That is a worse characteristic than main characters who act like blockheads!"

"I'm just a background character anyway. Not a main character like you, how nice."

"Annoying! Loner twisted nerdy virgins are annoying! Please, if you go on like this, Tendo will--"

"? Tendo-san will what?"

Why did he mention Tendo-san here? I couldn't help tilting my head.

The words 'oh shit' might as well be written on Uehara-kun as he

averted his eyes...

“... T-Tendo will keep calling you a ‘giant slug!’”

“Tendo-san calls me that behind my back!?”

What a surprise! Especially the fact that she didn’t choose the weakest minion, the cute ‘slime’. She went out of her way to call me a ‘giant slug’, that shows her malevolence clearly!

I might be shocked, but I still replied Uehara-kun:

“T-That’s really depressing... I wish she could upgrade me to the level of ‘giant rat’...”

Y-Yeah, that’s right. I don’t get your standards for doing that though... Eh, it’s a lie anyway...”

“Huh? What did you say?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

“I heard you say it’s a lie.”

“At times like this, you need to act like a main character that is hard of hearing! Why did you hear that! The love comedy can’t proceed like this! Are you consciously pulling out the flags!? You really have no right to be a main character! Even though you have the quality of a main character in attracting events!”

“W-Why am I being lectured?”

Did I mishear? That should be it, Uehara-kun had no reason to tell me a lie like that. Also, unless his conscience was biting at him... there was no reason for him to mumble about telling lies. Yes, I should reflect on this. Pulling myself together, I looked into Uehara-kun’s eyes again.

“I-I understand, Uehara-kun. Being branded a ‘giant slug’ is too miserable, so I will believe you and try rehabilitating! I will go to

that... Erm, Hoshinomori-san and chat with her!"

"G-Great! Amano, I'm glad you understand where I'm coming from. No point in wasting time--"

"Erm! Uehara-kun, please introduce that girl to....."

"-- Go and find that Hoshinomori, and talk to her now, Amano!"

"... Huh?"

For some reason, Uehara-kun slung his backpack onto his shoulders, then waved at me... Strange? Wasn't this the usual way he bid farewell...?

"I will be playing with Aguri at the arcade, I will pray for your success! Bye!"

".....Huh?"

Uehara-kun left the dazed me behind, and followed a girl with a light tan that was waiting outside the room before I realized it... She seemed to be his girlfriend named Aguri (I don't know why she always glares at me from afar before walking off). He left with this cute schoolmate hurriedly.

... Which means... I will be going to this female schoolmate I didn't know, and talk to her. And purely for the sake of building a better relationship... Yup, this simply means...

I clutched my bag as I sat alone in my seat, and muttered:

"Hmm? Isn't this just picking up girls...?"

.....

This idea from a normie was too horrifying, which made me shiver with a headache.

-- On top of nausea and a headache, I was also inflicted with

petrification.

Oh no, my stomach is starting to act up.

I walked towards Class A on the corridor, and couldn't help nursing my lower abdomen. There was a dull pain, as if someone filled it with lead. However, this pain probably wouldn't subside with stomach medicine.

Why do I have to go so far as to challenge picking up girls...?

Even I myself didn't understand why my legs didn't lead me to the shoe racks, but towards Class A. I wasn't that determined about this and felt repulsed by this idea, but my legs showed no signs of stopping.

Despite that, I thought about it as I walked and came up with a few possible reasons.

First, Uehara-kun's idea played a big factor. He isn't just a friend that I finally made, he even used his own methods to come up with this proposal. And also... he just happened to play a game made by 'NOBE' that didn't fit his taste, which made me feel bad...

He will ask me about the result the first thing next morning. If I answered 'I didn't even give it a try', that would be too disappointing as a friend. At least, I hope to answer: 'I went to her class to look, but I missed her as she already went home.'"

On top of that... that thing with Tendo-san bothers me too...

That was the second factor.

I still feel guilty about wasting her effort and goodwill. Since I had another chance to build an interpersonal relationship through games once again, I felt that I couldn't avoid this. Also, I didn't take everything Uehara-kun said wholesale, but if I want to meet Tendo-san again and apologize, it would be impossible if our relationship was so bad that she calls me a 'giant slug'. I need to at least be a bit

more decent.

And the last factor, which was trivial when compared to the previous two...

Just wanting to talk to a girl who likes games.

After getting to know Uehara-kun, I realized once again how happy it was to chat about games with others. There wasn't any grinding of skills or exchange of high value information... Just idly chatting about what games we liked, and which games were interesting. These carefree chats about games were really blissful.

When I realized it, my stomach didn't hurt that much now... Yup, it should work now. Go go, Amano Keita. I am not committing any nefarious acts, I should learn from Uehara-kun who made it into the high school social circle, and talk to that person confidently! I straightened up my posture and made my way outside Class A, then gulped.

The door to the classrooms were open since school was out, and the students inside the room would be able to see me if I took another step inside... I just remembered, this was basically the first time I was visiting another class... my legs started shivering.

I-It's fine! School is out, so there shouldn't be that many students around. Someone like me is different from Tendo-san, no one will notice even if I entered the classroom! Yes! Let's get it over with quickly

Making up my mind, I took a step forth and peered into the classroom from the entrance. As I expected, there were not many students around, and no one paid me any mind.

I patted my chest in relief and surveyed the room. And then--

“Ah.” “Ah.”

-- I locked eyes with an absolutely gorgeous blonde girl. Only now

did I remember... Tendo-san was in Class 2A too.

The school idol was seated in the middle of the class, surrounded by her classmates. When they saw her surprised face, their gazes slowly focused onto me... Oh no.

That incident between me and Tendo-san reached this class too, and the classroom turned a little rowdier. I couldn't help backing away and hiding half my body.

And so, even Tendo-san who always looks composed showed a wavering expression. After shifting her gaze away from me, she immediately did a simple touch up to her hair for some reason. She then cleared her throat, and appeared even more at ease than usual.

? Eh... What is with her reaction?

Could it be like Uehara-kun said, her reaction by treating me like a 'giant slug'? I took another look, and even though Tendo-san was blatantly making an expression of 'I am not bothered by Amano-san at all~~' while chatting with others, she would peek towards me from the corner of her eyes every now and then.

W-What is this? How should I interpret her attitude?

A-Anyway, the only thing I knew was that it felt very awkward. Leaving Tendo-san herself aside, the ones who grew tense from her unusual reaction were her classmates instead... Recently, I had been making too many enemies.

Feeling depressed, I still thought about my next course of action.

Well, my objective today is different anyway... Yup, I won't earn any ire if I don't bother the school idol.

After my quick conclusion, I stepped into the classroom once again, looking around the room in search of Hoshinomori-san. And of course, just the information 'quiet girl who likes games' wasn't enough for me to find that girl.

I was a bit hesitant, but I still steeled myself and chatted to the two girls closest to me.

“M-May I ask...”

“H-How can I help...?”

The reply was a bit too tense, which made me depressed. I told myself it wasn't because I was disgusting, but because I was the center of attention, so I muster my courage and looked at the other party's eyes.

-- However, the other girl asked before I state my question.

“A-Are you looking for Tendo-san?”

“Huh?”

Her question made a few girls in the classroom squeal a little. I peeked at Tendo-san, who was still cool and composed...But her eyes glanced my way more frequently, and her gaze seemed to be looking forward to something.

I couldn't guess what Tendo-san's intention was... I still waved hurriedly with a bitter smile. In order to not trouble Tendo-san, I refuted her with a heavier tone.

“Ah, no no. I am not interested in Tendo-san at all, and don't have any business with her!”

That moment, a loud ‘Cock’ sound came from the room. I was wondering what happened, and saw Tendo-san had banged her forehead onto the table, what the hell!

Not just me, the entire classroom was shaken by this. Tendo-san lifted her head slowly, and showed her typical graceful smile as if nothing had happened... That was scary. W-What's with her? Was she not feeling well?

But the atmosphere lightened because Tendo-san lifted her head.

Seeing this chance, the girl talking with me asked as if she just remembered something:

“Eh, s-so you are not looking for Tendo-san? I heard the rumours and thought...”

I nodded to affirm her suspicion, and did my best to answer with a smile:

“Yup, I am here to look for another girl, not Tendo-san.”

“Cock!”

The knocking sound sounded even louder than earlier! Tendo-san’s forehead had sunk into the table a little, and steam like smoke was wisping out! T-Tendo-san?

Everyone held their breath. As for Tendo-san, she slowly raised her twisted smiling face that looked like a mask... said to her classmates “excuse me for a moment”, then left her seat... She then walked towards me with a smile on her face!

Uwah! W-Why!? Why is Tendo-san walking to me !? It got so awkward the previous time! I still haven’t shaken off my title of ‘giant slug’ yet!

The situation was completely unexpected-- like grinding near a save point and suddenly entering a final boss fight, which threw me into extreme confusion.

Under the watchful gaze of the students from Class A, Tendo-san came before me, and spoke after widening her smile even further:

“It’s been awhile, Amano-kun.”

"L-Long time no see, Tendo-san..."

I was so nervous that my entire body turned stiff, and I broke out



in cold sweat. Compared to the first time I met Tendo-san, my fear had grown stronger. My smug feeling from back then was completely gone, and only the negative and darkness remains. I was scared.

I stood up straight as if I was being lectured by a teacher for violating school rules.

Tendo-san was composed and smiling... But at the same time, she seemed a little nervous as she asked me:

“So, what brings you to Class A? I-I heard just now that you are looking for a girl...”

“Ah, yes. I am looking for a girl in Class A...”

“... I-Is that so?”

“? Yes.”

Tendo-san who was standing appeared a little giddy for an instant... So she really was unwell?

But the next moment, she seemed to have figured something out and turned cheerful. She then asked me excitedly, as if she was clearing up something:

“Oh right, I know! Amano-kun is so serious, so you must be looking for a girl from my class for committee work or some other duties--”

“Erm, no, it’s not like that.”

I panicked because I seemed to have been misunderstood, so I spilled the beans without a second thought.

“I came to class A in order to build a better relationship with that girl! It has nothing to do with Tendo-san!”

.....faints

"T-Tendo-san?"

Tendo-san still had a smile on her face, but she was falling backwards for some reason. I rushed forth to support Tendo-san's back and held her steadily, and squeals erupted from her class. No no, now is not the time for that kind of reaction! No matter how I looked at it, Tendo-san had obviously fallen ill! And her face was red as she looked at me from such a close distance! Not just that, her mouth was opening and shutting, like a goldfish gasping for air...

"!~~! Ugh~~! P-Pla..."

"Pla?"

Tendo-san wanted to say something, so I turned my head and perked my ears. And so, she...

She suddenly wailed with tears in her eyes!

"You big playboy~~~~~!!"

"Huhhhh!?"

Tendo-san pushed me away, and ran out of the classroom... Weird, what happened? This felt familiar though, what was with this situation?



By the way... What did she say? Beckpla buoy...? What did that mean?

Tendo-san was probably too near and she wailed too suddenly, so I didn't hear what she said clearly. Well, I thought I heard 'big playboy', but that was definitely not words to describe me. Ugh~~ ... I was really bothered, and wondered what she actually said.

But the sharp gazes from the people around me didn't allow me to ask any further... Could it be, they think Tendo-san and I were a couple and we were having a fight? Even though Tendo-san was just feeling under the weather... I couldn't stand it, for her classmates to not show concern for her at a time like this felt wrong to me!

I felt a little angry for acting like a 'dense main character who didn't show concern for how others felt'. Thanks to that, I could relax my tensed emotions and asked the female student once again:

"Erm, I'm looking for a Hoshinomori Chiaki... Is she here?"

When the female student heard my question, her mouth was wide open as she said something nonsensical:

"I-Instead of Tendo-san, you want Hoshinomori!?"

">Huh? Erm... that's right, I'm not here for Tendo-san, I'm here to look for Hoshinomori-san."

I didn't know why she mentioned Tendo-san, but I still answered her.

For some reason, the classroom turned rowdy... What was it, what was it?

The female student seemed impressed as she looked at me.

"Y-You think Hoshinomori is better? Even after seeing Tendo-san?"

“? Well, I am only here for Hoshinomori-san though.”

I was losing patience. So annoying for them to involve Tendo-san in everything they say, although I know she was really popular. And the squeals in the room every time I speak. What’s wrong with this class? You should worry about Tendo-san’s health instead! I couldn’t stand it!

And so, I insisted that Hoshinomori was the only choice for me. The classroom got even rowdier... I don’t get it.

With a face of a neighbourhood housewife entertaining herself with the love gossips of others, she pointed to a corner of the classroom... Taking reference from my class, It happened to be near where I was seated.

After being shown the way, I looked over there and...

This... U-Uehara-kun’s information network is too strong...

I saw someone with earphones looking down at the screen of her console, oblivious to everything that just happened in the classroom. She just concentrated on her gaming with a blissful smile--

-- She was the same type as a certain someone, this background type girl without any thing striking about her was sitting there.

This is... just like the reenactment of that scene last time.

A student who had drawn the gazes of all the students in the class was approaching another student playing video games at a corner of the classroom.

The only different thing was, unlike Tendo-san, I was a big coward.

Tendo-san she... is always basking under such gazes...

Only now did I felt impressed by this fact. Just recently, I was on the verge of breaking down just coming into contact with Tendo-

san... Tendo-san endured more gazes than this and still managed to act naturally.

... Really, the more I get to know her, the further she feels. She can still insist on the things that she likes, which makes her truly a great person... I have to at least shake off my title of 'Giant Slug'.

Nowadays, whenever I think about Tendo-san, I will compose myself mentally. This wasn't just superficial admiration, I understand that she was worthy of respect... Although we were the same age.

After steeling myself, I didn't want to lose to those gazes, and walked straight up to Hoshinomori-san.

She was still wearing her headphones with her eyes glued to the screen.

I just stood in front of her desk and looked down at this scene.

.....

".....c-cough cough!"

"....."

...Oh no, the other party didn't notice me at all. This schoolmate of mine was focusing entirely on the game.

W-What should I do? Touching the shoulder of a girl... Isn't good either...

To be honest, I wasn't comfortable with taking the initiative to talk to others. Not just that, I seldom contact others through phones or emails either... Because I will wonder: 'Am I bothering them?' Pushing myself to ask a female classmate about Hoshinomori-san was already my limit.

On top of that, Hoshinomori-san...

It feels that... she is completely immersed in her game, it is hard to

chat her up...

I could empathize since I play games often too, there was nothing that spoils my mood more than being dragged back into reality when you were totally engrossed in the game world.

Hoshinomori-san leaned forth and studied the screen carefully. Her curly hair that reminded me of seaweeds covered both side of her console, barring away the annoying sunlight.

She is absolutely in a world of her own! It is hard to chat her up!

I also play video games in class, but not to such an extent... Or I hope I didn't. No, if Uehara-kun was to judge, he would probably say: 'how alike.'

Okay, I couldn't bear to interrupt Hoshinomori-san who was focusing so intently on her game. To be honest, my business with her was just trivial chat about 'let's be friends.'

I pulled out the chair in front of Hoshinomori-san's desk, and sat on it side ways with my elbow on the back of the seat. Frankly speaking, I didn't really dare to sit in someone else's place, but the owner seemed to have already went home, so this was an exception.

I peeked at the screen of the game. Thankfully, there wasn't that much seaweed like hair to the front, so I got a clear view.

Hmm, isn't this 'Aegis VIII' that was just released last week? I happen to be playing this too...

On the screen was a 2D style chibi male main character defeating enemies with his sword and exploring the open plains. This type of game was known as Action RPG.

Fearing spoilers, I timidly checked how far Hoshinomori-san's had progressed in the game. She seemed to be slightly slower than me, so I patted my chest in relief and continued watching her play.

"....."

On closer look, she seemed happier than I imagined. I caught a glimpse of her mouth through her hair, and she looked defenseless, opening it halfway in her joy. It was a little disgusting, but I felt as if I just met a comrade, and felt really happy.

How should I put this... Maybe I like seeing people enjoying their games with a smile.

It was probably because I saw Hoshinomori-san's blissful face, it eased my tensed emotions greatly.

I watched her play her game in silence momentarily.

The main character charged around the plains, defeated mob monsters, and then explored every corner of a dungeon.

Before I realized it, only the two of us were left in the classroom illuminated by the setting sunlight. I saw a few bags around the classroom, so it just happens that just the two of us were alone...

Ugh... If I want to talk to her, now should be the best chance... right...?

Without the gaze of bystanders, the bar for picking up girls lowered substantially... Wait, no no no, this wasn't picking up girls!

My head started hurting again. To avoid the atmosphere going astray, I had to choose the way I start the conversation carefully.

Anyway, I decided to leave the conclusion for later, and return my gaze onto her game screen. And then...

Ah, she is finally going after the boss? What a long journey. The difficulty of this dungeon didn't feel like the games of recent years. The enemies are strong and the save point is placed near the entrance.

The game was entering its climax, and my thoughts on chatting up



Hoshinomori-san was tossed aside.

Hoshinomori-san gulped nervously. Indeed, if she loses now, all her time spent playing after school would be for nought. And from what I glimpsed, Hoshinomori-san didn't grind too hard, and could even get in trouble fighting the dungeon's minions. Her skills were similar to mine, she knew the controls, but was not very proficient.

As for whether she can beat the boss, it's probably 50-50. I only challenged him after grinding to a higher level than Hoshinomori-san, so I had more leeway, but it was still a tough fight.

The boss room was right before her. Hoshinomori-san stopped, and I couldn't help straightening my back.

And so, after waiting for five seconds... Hoshinomori-san finally stepped into the boss room. After the display of an exaggerated warning message, a huge rock giant blocked the main character's path.

...Gasp.

We both gasped at the same time.

Hoshinomori-san pulled away from the boss, planning to observe his attack pattern first. This was the standard method when one faces a boss you met in an Action RPG for the first time. However...

"Swoomp!"

"!"

With the soft sound effect that leaked out from her ear phones, stone spears sprouted out from the walls of the cave. This was one of the annoying ability of this boss, if you go near any stone walls or objects, it will attack with spears that was almost too fast too dodge.

This attack will definitely land the first time. And she will think it is just a trap, then get stabbed again when she hides in the other corner.

Just when I was thinking that, Hoshinomori-san got stabbed as I expected. Her movement pattern really resembles mine, which made me giggle.

Now that I thought about it, even the way Hoshinomori-san played earlier was eerily similar to mine. Even though I often watched my younger brother play and others livestreaming their playthrough online, I had never seen someone whose thought process was so similar to mine. The truth was, this game was very liberal in playstyle, weapon choice, stats allocation and skills to learn. But somehow, her choices were almost similar to mine.

Ah, she won't expect the spear to sprout from other objects, and will get stabbed once more.

As I was thinking that, Hoshinomori-san got stabbed as I expected.

"~~!"

Hoshinomori-san's face turned anxious. That hit brought the main character's HP bar to the halfway mark, and there was basically no way to heal during boss fights in this game. Items couldn't be used, so magic was the only means. But that would drain a lot of MP, and the casting time was also rather long.

That was why grinding to increase attack and max HP was so important.

Oh no, it might be difficult to win like this.

Even though I was at a higher level than her, I barely managed to defeat the boss. In that case, since her skill and play style was about the same as me... her odds are low.

Okay, although she made up her mind to attack the boss fiercely, that heavy smash attack with an unreasonably wide hitbox... Ara, she got crushed as expected.

Hoshinomori-san made the same mistakes I did.

Fearing that the time she spent adventuring would be wasted, her breathing started getting ragged, but her controls remain deft and cautious, easily dodging the attacks she had seen before and counter attacking. The boss' HP dwindled slowly, and the tide was turning, but the main character will fall with another hit.

She replicated my situation almost perfectly! But when I was playing, I grinded harder so I could still take another hit when I took down the boss... But for her...

This could literally be described as nerve wrecking.

I was leaning completely forward, Hoshinomori-san and my forehead was almost touching as we watched the screen, but she was so focused that she didn't notice me.

Hoshinomori-san could dodge the attacks she had seen before... But this boss will use new attacks when his HP drops...

Although it was an attack that could be evaded easily after seeing it once, it was used in a way that would 'definitely hit players who saw it the first time'... At least it hit me.

Damn it, it will be unbearable to die after making it this far!

I was more emotionally invested than usual because I watched the progress of the game together with her!

I glanced at Hoshinomori-san's face, and she seemed to be enjoying this tension too, but I still felt...

That's right, the grueling game difficulty might add to the experience... But if possible, players would still prefer to avoid wasting the vast amount of adventuring time they spent.

And for Hoshinomori-san, there was probably some other reason. Gaming inside the classroom in public view was not very conducive, and the gaze of her classmates didn't feel comfortable either. If her adventure was all wasted... That would be too terrible.

It was finally time.

The Rock Giant raised its hand in a 'banzai' stance, and started charging for an attack.

"!"

Having not seen this attack pattern, Hoshinomori-san was surprised. This was natural, as the pattern that worked so far had been dodging left if the boss moved its right hand, dodging right if it moved its left hand.

But this time, 'both hands were raised'... several ways of dodging would come to mind, but she wouldn't be able to confirm which works best and...

She will pull back as she thinks putting some distance between them cannot go wrong! I did that too! But--

The Rock Giant finished charging.

After hesitating for a moment, Hoshinomori-san pulled the control stick down hard and pressed the emergency evade button, dashing backwards--

"Dodge forward!"

-- I couldn't help yelling before that happens!

"!"

Hoshinomori-san immediately pushed the control stick forward instead, making the character roll between the legs of the Rock Giant! At the same time, the Giant smashed the ground with its fists, a donut shaped shock wave spread outwards in all directions.

That's right... except for the safe spot between the legs of the Giant, it will hit everywhere else.

"Now! Hit it hit it hit it!"

"!~~!"

As I cheered her on, Hoshinomori-san mashed the attack button, plummeting the Giant who was exposed after it dished out a huge attack! And so, when the Giant's stun time ended and it prepared for its next attack--

"!"

-- The HP of the boss had finally been depleted.

After a brief silence, the Rock Giant exploded dramatically.

The moment the stage clear message was flashed... We couldn't help standing up.

Coming back to our senses, we locked eyes and shouted:

"Oh right--!"

Hoshinomori-san and I high fived with our right hands.

Looking at her again, Hoshinomori-san was an innocent looking cute female girl when she lifted her head. But when her seaweed like fringe drooped down again, she immediately... turned back into a vague existence.

Ah, I felt it was a pity. I wanted to look at her face more clearly... Wait.

"....."

Snapping out of it, the two of us were touching palms, and staring blankly at each other.

Her earphone fell from her left ear, and the sound from the game buzzed in the silent classroom.

Hoshinomori-san... asked in a voice as soft as a mosquito's:

"..... E-Erm, may I ask... Who are you?"

"Ah~~... Well, that's..."

Thinking from her perspective,

Returning to reality from the game she was completely engrossed in, she found the classroom to be empty except for a guy she had never seen before smiling intimately and touching palms with her.

This wasn't a matter of picking up girls anymore, it wouldn't be strange if she made a police report. This first meeting was very much overboard.

".....Eh~~..... Please listen..... Well..... I..... Erm....."

"....."

My gamer brain that splendidly rescued her from a crisis... failed to provide a single ounce of useful information right now.

"....."

Hoshinomori-san and I sat on the bench of the deserted bus station. The setting sun provided warmth for my back.

In the end, I tried to express my reason for finding her. Even though she remained skeptical, she still agreed to speak with me on the condition of only doing so before her bus arrives. The reason she stayed so late in school seemed to be the low frequency of the bus she was taking home.

And so, the situation turned into me waiting together with her for her bus...

Oh no... After a short conversation in class, I didn't speak with her properly...

It was fine while we were walking, but once we sat down, the silence was unbelievably heavy. That being the case, talking about

games right off the bat seemed inadequate too. I decided to start off with trivial matters.

“The bus... How long before it comes?”

Hoshinomori-san trembled for some reason when she heard me, then answered with a bit of stutter.:

“... Erm, a-a-about f-fifteen minutes... But... it depends on the traffic...”

“I see, there are few trips, and the arrival time is unreliable, it must be hard on you.”

Hoshinomori-san nodded quietly.

"....."

..... Hmm. It felt like the conversation was over. Although Hoshinomori-san didn't say much and answered in short spurts, I was the one responsible for holding the conversation and was despairingly unskilled in this. I thought I had improved somewhat after talking to Tendo-san and Uehara-kun, but I was wrong. The two of them were the ones who were good, I didn't improve at all. No matter what, I should start with an introduction. With that in mind, I said with a stammer:

“Ah, s-sorry, it's a bit late to say this now, b-but, I'm from Class F, my name is Amano Keita.”

"You are Amano... san."

"Y-Yes. And... well..."

... I couldn't think of a good opening line. That was expected. Who could say something like 'I want to be good friends with you'! Even putting it in a nice way, it would be troubling to underestimate how bad my social skill was.

... After agonizing over it, I gave up and handed the topic docilely over to the other party.

"Hoshinomori-san... you... like... video games... right?"

The two of us were in the same grade, so I should be more relaxed and speak to her as an equal. But I didn't have the guts.

Hoshinomori-san nodded in response... Her eyes covered by her seaweed-like hair seemed to be looking at me suspiciously.

Although her gaze made me anxious, I still racked my brains to keep the conversation going.

But to my surprise, Hoshinomori-san spoke to me on her own.

"E-Erm... Y-You are from the Gamers Club, right?"

"Huh?"

I didn't know how to react to this unexpected question and Hoshinomori-san lowered her head for some reason.

"I'm sorry. No matter how many times you all ask... I-I don't intend to join the Gamers Club..."

"Huh? P-Please wait a minute!"

"?"

Seeing how flustered I was, Hoshinomori-san tilted her head bafflingly. I raised my voice to clear the misunderstanding.

"I'm not from the Gamers Club, alright? Well, they did invite me before..."

"? Then, you are not acting together with Hyobu-san... or Tendo-san?"

"? I don't know who Hyobu-san is... But Tendo-san did invite me to



join the Gamers Club. And just like you, I turned her down...”

“...J-Just like me...?”

Hoshinomori-san opened her eyes in surprise. However, I was the one who was shocked. I didn’t expect us to have things in common for even that part.

Anyway, I decided to clear up our relationships with the Gamers Club. I told her the gist of what happened between Tendo-san and me, and Hoshinomori-san bowed towards me with her face slightly blushed and said:

“M-Me too! A freshman girl called Hyobu-san invited me... And then... I visited the Gamers Club once... But, eh, how should I put this...”

“Ah, take your time, it’s fine.”

I reminded her with a smile. Hoshinomori-san was acting just like I did when I spoke with Tendo-san, which amused me a lot... Sigh, although I felt rather thick-skinned for looking at her from such a perspective.

Hoshinomori-san backed away a little shyly, then continued:

“... I turned down the, Gamers Club... because... erm...”

Hoshinomori-san seemed very anxious about finding the right words to express herself. Inspiration struck, and I took the initiative and told her:

“Is it because... The actual content of the club is different than the ‘gaming’ you had in mind?”

! Nods her head furiously!

After hearing what I said, Hoshinomori-san nodded as if she was enlightened. I felt happy about it, and couldn’t help continuing:

“The Gamers Club is good and all, but for us, that is too dazzling...”

"T-That's right! Playing games with others is enjoyable, I enjoy a match with another person occasionally too... B-But, I have no intention of being the very best that no one ever was..."

“I know right!? But, the Gamers Club is a through and through ‘club activity’.”

Nods furiously!

"Like I said, Hyobu-san who invited me... As well as Tendo-san who approached me again on the basis of being classmates, I feel bad towards them... However..."

“Yes... since gaming is our sanctuary, we can't really compromise on this...”

“... Yes...”

When we realized it, we had already started chatting. Seems like our similarities were beyond Uehara-kun's expectation, we were alike to the very core.

With the tension eased, I naturally moved to the main topic.

“I prefer playing casually. Like those mindlessly repetitive mobile games...”

“T-That's right, I get it. Playing leisurely is important, right! But that doesn't mean I only like simple games...”

“Yup, difficult games are nice too. Like those that explores dungeons...”

“Well, RTS and those foreign beat-them-up games are attractive too... Right?”

“Of course! Although I am really bad at them.”

“Yes, my skills are terrible too.”

The two of us laughed softly.

I didn’t expect to find someone to talk about games with like this... Today is a good day.

I was enjoying the blissful moment quietly. Although being chatted up by Tendo-san the first time was also blissful enough to give me wings; but the bliss I felt today was different in nature compared to that day.

I took a look, and Hoshinomori-san who was lowering her head had a cheerful expression now, as she looked at me excitedly.

“Hoshinomori-san, I am surprised... Erm, this might sound rude, but you are really chatty.”

“Not at all, that’s not true. B-But, I will talk more when I am with people I am comfortable with...”

Oh no, that’s just like me. No wonder she sounded so intimate. I wasn’t sure if it was her catch phrase, but she will occasionally repeat herself with ‘t-that’ or ‘b-but’, which express her seriousness and was unexpectedly soothing. I took a deep breath and said:

“Sigh, I feel at ease. Hoshinomori-san, you don’t really make me conscious that you are a girl- Ah, putting it that way sounds rude, my bad.”

My words made Hoshinomori-san smile wryly.

“Not at all not at all! That’s my tone when I speak, so that’s natural! Erm... all this while, I couldn’t get used to the way girls talk... even using ‘watashi’ makes me feel embarrassed. B-But, I am glad that you find this more comfortable.”

Hoshinomori-san might be bashful, but she still smiled... How touching...

She is actually talking happily to someone like me... Oh no, I feel like crying.

Ever since I entered high school... No, in a sense, fulfilling a lifelong wish made me feel touched. But at this moment, I noticed a bus approaching on the road.

“Ah, Hoshinomori-san, is that the bus you are taking?”

I asked her, feeling that it was a shame. Hoshinomori-san confirmed it with a slightly gloomy face: “Ah, yes, that’s the one...”

Well, it can’t be helped. There is always next time...

With that in mind, I stood up and said: “Let’s stop here for today...”

Hoshinomori-san answered: “Yes...”

As she got up, the bus rolled into the bus stop, and the door near the driver’s side opened.

It would be awkward for Hoshinomori-san if I kept looking at her, so I turned my back to the bus and walked towards the school.

Ah, I’m glad I mustered my courage. Will she be willing to chat about games with me next time...?

The door of the bus closed with a ‘pomf’ behind me. When the bus passed me by, I looked at its window, seeking out Hoshinomori-san. But she was probably seated on the other side as I couldn’t find her.

Feeling a warmth that didn’t stem from the weather, I walked back to school alone.

-- At this moment, I heard someone jogging towards me. Strange, there wasn’t anyone around just now. I turned as I thought about that, and found...

“Hmm... H-Huh, Hoshinomori-san?”

"A-Amano-san."

Hoshinomori-san who was rushing to me lowered her gaze shyly, as she fidgeted with her bag she was holding in front of her. She seemed to be squeezing out all her courage as she said:

"E-Erm... T-The bus that goes to my home... comes infrequently..."

"Yes, I-I know. Hmm? I-Isn't that the bus you were... waiting for?"

I was half confused and half expectant, which made my heart race. I waited quietly for Hoshinomori-san's next words. I could see how red her face was despite her long fringe... she shouted her proposal to me:

"E-Erm, before the next bus comes, can you chat with me for an hour!?"

These words and how cute Hoshinomori-san was dazed me for a moment--

My face turned as red as her's was, and I replied quickly:

"I-I will be happy to!"

This felt like being invited to go for a drink. Although I have never visited a bar before.

"....."

Our attitudes were too stiff, which made me smile.

And so, the two of us returned to campus, and finding that Class A was still empty, we started chatting there again. The more we talked, the more I realized that Hoshinomori-san's hobby and interest aligned surprisingly with mine, which made me suspect that we were siblings separated by birth. Well, my blood related younger brother was completely different from me in his hobbies though. After asking,

I realized that Hoshinomori-san also had an excellent younger sister too, even this part was eerily like me too.

Especially for video games, the games we played, our attitude towards them and even our playstyle were virtually identical.

After chatting for 50 minutes, our nervousness when we first met was all gone and we were really close.

Not just Uehara-kun, I spoke to her with a tone more intimate than my younger brother and asked:

“Oh right, Chiaki. You were playing ‘Aegis VIII’ just now, so you like the Aegis series?”

I didn’t use honorifics for a girl, which was not like me at all. It was the same for Chiaki too...

"Of course! T-That’s right, you really saved me just now, Keita."

Chiaki had gotten used to calling me by name, this scene was just like a loving couple about to get married, but people who got along were probably like this, yup.

.....

..... No, thinking about it calmly, it was strange for us to be so close. But for the two of us who didn’t make any friends before, this issue was the same for both of us. The appearance of a too ideal person to talk with resulted in our brains secreting excessive endorphins, and we were in a drunk-like state.

Our faces were flushed as if we had beer, and kept talking in our excited state.

..... In a way, this was a ‘dream-like’ period of time.

We had completely forgotten about the next bus timing, and chatted intimately.

"Speaking of which, the Aegis series is really a masterpiece, Chiaki!"

"T-That's right! I love that series! The best part about it is..."

"Yup, it is definitely..."

Looking at each other's face, bearing an expectation of our views in aligning, we shouted the charming part about the Aegis series--

"Music right!" "Characters right!"

..... Huh?

"....."

..... We stared at each other blankly... That was strange. There seemed to be a difference in opinions just now... N-No, that wasn't possible, yup.

With a smile that was a little stiff, I continued by acknowledging Chiaki's view:

"Y-You are right, the music in that series is absolutely fantastic."

"T-That's right, yes. No matter what, the charming part of that series is in its music! Using music to bring out the fine aesthetics of fantasy! The world building only works uniformly because of the music!"

"I completely agree."

I had no arguments about that. The music in the Aegis series was wonderful. However, the foundation of the world building had to be supported by the character design--

"The only flaw is some 'Moe' elements got mixed into the character design."

"Huh?"

“What?”

For a moment, time seemed to freeze. I squeezed out a smile and said “No no no.”

“What are you saying, Chiaki? The Aegis series is built on the enchanting heroines that debut in its various venues.”

Chiaki seemed baffled by my words, and tilted her head to the side.

“? Ara ara, you sure like to jest, Keita. What are you talking about? Isn’t the heroines the only flaws in the Aegis series? The later releases trend towards ‘Moe’ a little too much. ‘Moe’ is the main thing that spoiled the game, right?”

“Huh, what are you saying? ‘Moe’ is a great spice for all media, you can even say it is a crucial ingredient. Although it would be troubling if the balance goes off scale...”

Chiaki slowly frowned as she listened to what I said. She squeezed out a stiff smile and said:

“H-Hold on, Keita, please stop joking. ‘Moe’ only brings detriments with no benefits to gaming right?”





When I heard what she said, I also replied with a forced smile:

“No no no, you should be the one to stop joking, right? ‘Moe’ surpasses gender, and even extends to inanimate objects too... It is embodied in all things in life, no matter how hardcore a work is, we can still find a wonderful entertainment value in it, that’s ‘Moe’.”

".....Huh?"

".....Ah?"

.....

-- I felt the temperature inside the classroom increased by a degree or two.

“Y-You had a big fight with her!?”

Uehara-kun yelled hysterically, silencing the rowdy Class 2F.

I was bothered by the gazes from around me, but I still mumbled a reply while scratching my face:

"Well... Something like that..."

"H-How did things turn out like that...?"

Uehara-kun sat onto the seat in front of my desk, and placed his right elbow on the table menacingly.

When the gazes of our classmates drifted away, I turned my eyes away from Uehara-kun and replied:

"... I guess it's our difference in values and beliefs..."

"Huh? Hey hey hey, I heard that Hoshinomori is a loner girl who likes games. What is this about? Is she a fujoshi who only plays BL games?"

"N-No, it's not that... The games we like are almost the same... And our game preference is so alike that she is practically my body double..."

"? Eh, or is she actually a hidden normie, or her personality is very repulsive... something like that?"

"No, it's not that either... Her experiences were almost the same as mine, and we got along fine as if she was my doppelganger. To be honest, she speaks a little nerdy, but that makes it more relaxing and I was less conscious about her being a girl. She was more like a friend to me than you who is lofty for some reason."

"What?"

"I like you the best."

I tried smiling amiably, but it seemed to be disgusting too, spoiling Uehara-kun's mood badly. With a solemn face, he asked:

"I don't get it at all. Shouldn't you two get along great? Not just friends, she might as well be your fated partner."

"Erm... That's true. We did hit it off great."

Uehara-kun couldn't fathom the reasons and tilted his head. He then asked me from another approach.

"So, what led to the fight? It's a serious matter, right?"

"Well... Because we..."

I averted my eyes away from Uehara-kun, and said it quietly in an attempt to bring it across casually:

"... We fought because our attitude on 'Moe' is different..."

"You retard!"

I was completely refuted by Uehara-kun's loud voice. With no

regards to the gaze of our classmates, he leaned towards me agitatedly.

"What the hell! Why did you fight so hard about this with a girl you just met!?"

"Erm, how should I put this... This is how vast the gulf between our communication skills with girls are."

"I feel a different sort of respect towards you now! Just one short hour, and you turn from a first meeting to getting along like a one true pair, then progressed to sworn enemies! I'm not as fast as you!"

"Because I'm the type who will choose the simple options wrong even when I play galgames because I overthink things."

"I'm starting to see why you can't make friends!"

After venting his agitation, Uehara-kun was stupefied and sighed, then laid onto the table.

"First Tendo, then Hoshinomori... Why did you get into a fight with someone that matches your ideals...?"

"Even if she is a girl, I won't back down. For it concerns gaming!"

"What useless manliness you are asserting! So that's what happens when a nerdy loner gets involved with his strange ego!"

"... Erm, U-Uehara-kun. Wasn't it cool when I announced that I won't back down just now? If this is a scene from a light novel, this will definitely be a timeless quote--"

"Let me tell you then, that is really revolting!"

Uehara-kun was filled with rage as he lashed out... Weird, I thought my recent conviction was a good thing. Looks like I completely misunderstood. Life is hard.

Uehara-kun looked at me with utter disappointment. I decided to

rebuke him a little.

“A-Alright, I admit that incident with Tendo-san was completely my fault. But this time... I think Chiaki and I should share the blame.”

“You are calling her directly by name? Just how close did you two get in one day...? Sigh, forget that for now, since you said there was a big fight, the other party must have retorted too...”

“Of course. And the content of our fight is basically about the necessity of ‘Moe’ in games and other media. I agree; she thinks there is only harm without any benefit.”

“Yup, from the topic of your big fight, I can tell you two get along really well.”

“Stop that! Getting along with such a person makes me want to puke!”

“Just how bad is your relationship with her! You are just like a divorced couple!”

I crossed my arms in silence, and Uehara-kun sighed deeply... He then looked at me as if I was annoying.

“Well, even so... you two are basically compatible, right? In that case, you just need to apologize and make up with her.”

“Hmmp, instead of such humiliation, I would rather commit seppuku!”

“The determination of a Samurai completely does not fit with you, why are you so repulsed by that idea! ... Sigh, I get it I get it. I will go together with you after school, that’s fine, right? With someone as a buffer, you two will discuss more calmly, right?”

“..... If you insist, this humble one won’t reject your offer.”

"Yup, even I am thinking about ending our friendship. Seriously though, I am really intrigued by Hoshinomori who got into a huge fight with you. I will accompany you there after school."

Uehara-kun then massaged his shoulders lazily and waltz back to his own seat.

... That's true, with Uehara-kun soothing things, maybe we can reach a compromise...

After all, I didn't fight with Chiaki because I wanted to. If we could get along, that would be for the best.

With this faint hope in our after school meeting, I started playing social games again.

In conclusion, it was hopeless.

"What! Wait wait, Keita, what do you mean! The Japanese game industry that is leaning too much towards 'Moe', and the foreign game industry that prioritize gameplay and story! Just think about it and you will know which side holds the advantage! Stupid stupid stupid~~! I can't stand it, shorty with narrow field of vision is really..."

"H-Hold it hold it, Chiaki-san. Let me ask you then, when you play foreign made games, don't you ever think: 'If only the girls are drawn cuter...' No, you definitely did, right? Romance or not, 'Moe' and 'cute' are important elements! Narrow minded seaweed head who can't even get this is really..."

"Huh~~?"

"Yeah?"

"Timeout timeout time~~ out!"

Uehara-kun got between Chiaki and me who were glaring at each other.

I had no choice but to back off, as for Chiaki.....

"... O-Okay, Uehara-san....."

She backed away quietly with her face red... Although she was an introvert, her reaction definitely didn't stem from that reason. From the looks of things...

"Oh~~ Chiaki, you only have eyes for handsome guys, but not 'Moe'.

"What did you say!? T-T-That has nothing to do with this! Also also, I-I am not ogling... I-It is not like... what you said..."

Chiaki kept stealing glances at Uehara-kun, and would lower her head shyly when their eyes met.

I sighed exasperatedly.

Sigh... Uehara-kun says he will be neutral during our discussion, but he is basically supportive of Chiaki... It's only natural, he's handsome after all.

As I was feeling disinterested, Uehara-kun showed his obvious fatigue as he smoothed things over.

"Why are the two of you so quick to bicker... And you are criticizing each other's appearance right? That's not good. Although it's true that Amano is a virgin shortie."

"Hey."

I glared at my friend who was not neutral at all. He ignored me and smiled amiably at Chiaki.

"Hoshinomori, I think your hair is nice. Natural curl looks great on girls, and has a feel that artificial curls can't replicate. How could he call you a seaweed head, I can't stand him..."

Uehara-kun seemed to be saying this seriously, he even scratched

his head as he glared at me in bewilderment... I-I didn't think Chiaki's hair was that bad, I was just getting back at her for badmouthing me...

Chiaki looked at Uehara-kun with a dazed look of admiration... Her eyes were just like how I looked at Tendo-san some time ago.

I can understand how she feels... After all, I admire Uehara-kun too.

How should I put this, maybe he had a certain charm that attracts nerds? The subject himself probably wouldn't be happy about this though.

Right now, we were seated at the back of Class F, with three chairs placed around one table. And of course, there was some distance between Chiaki and me, with Uehara-kun in the middle, his elbow on the desk.

It had been 40 minutes since we started talking after school. We went all out since the beginning in a continuation of yesterday's fight. And so, even with Uehara-kun mediating as a neutral, it only shifted how we feel about him, while our relationship showed no signs of warming.

With the issue at an impasse, Uehara-kun finally muttered impatiently:

"Why is your relationship so bad? It might not sound nice, but to me, the two of you are the same kind. For someone like me who couldn't get what you two are arguing about, I think you two get along superbly well... Hey, don't make such an obviously repulsive face!"

Uehara-kun yelled when they saw the expressions we were making. I glanced at Chiaki, and she glared back at me through the gaps of her seaweed...

"Don't duel with your eyes! Sigh... you two are really...!"



Uehara-kun ruffled his hair hard. After exchanging looks, we tried to speak in a non-hostile tone.

"..... How far had you played 'Aegis VIII'?"

I started the conversation. Seaweed head... No, Chiaki answered as she averted her gaze.

"... E-Erm..... I-I reached the 'hidden village of the elves'..."

Her words made me intrigued and I leaned closer!

"Ah, you played until that part!? That is one of the most beautiful villages in the entire series!"

Chiaki also answered excitedly when she heard me:

"Yes yes! That's right, it is really wonderful! There are many ways to showcase an Elven village, but it's rare seeing one that could build the atmosphere to be so fantastical and intellectual at the same time!"

"That's right! Not just that, the graphics give the player a subtle sense that the village dislikes humans and doesn't welcome outsiders. The way they present that is really masterful. The thing that builds the atmosphere further would be the pretty--"

"B-But, the only regrettable part is the unpleasant Moe--"

At this moment, our voices overlaps perfectly.

"Character portraits of the elves!"

"..... " "....."

Sharp sound of friction came from the air. There were other students in the classroom, but everyone just happened to stop at the same time. The ticking sound of the clock reverberated in the classroom. And then--

""Huh?""

"Why are you arguing about that!"

The moment the two of us glared at each other, Uehara-kun retorted loudly.

Not giving Chiaki and I the chance to continue, he gave his opinion:

"90% of your opinions matches correct!? You don't need to go that far! Why don't you two compromise on the last 10%!?"

In response to his opinion... Chiaki and I smiled wryly.

"Uehara-kun, you don't get it. We... will even turn down an invitation to a normies Gamers Club, we are lone gamers, and the only thing we build up is our strong egos. Especially on our taste in games, there are no backing down for us in that!"

"Keita is right! Just like the gap between lovable bad games and detestable games that couldn't be explained easily! Lone gamers also have a line they won't back down from!"

"You two are such a pain!"

As Uehara-kun finally showed a face of stupefied resignation, Chiaki and I used this chance of him not interfering to argue as much as we could.

Before I realized it, we had ignored him and another 20 minutes passed.

We were still fighting, but when I saw Uehara-kun's girlfriend... Aguri-san peering in from the corridor, I remembered.

Ah, he said he is meeting his girlfriend, and can only accompany us until 5.

I stopped arguing when I remembered what Uehara-kun said. While Chiaki was tilting her head baffledly, Uehara-kun suddenly

muttered as he checked his smart phone: "Oh no."

I didn't have the chance to tell him that Aguri-san was here, and he started packing his stuff in a hurry.

"Sorry, let's call it a day, alright? Well, you two can continue--"

""Don't wanna.""

"I thought so. Anyway, I'm meeting someone at the school gate at 5."

Hmm? Meeting at the school gate? Aguri-san is already here to pick you up... Ah, you couldn't see her from your side.

I wanted to warn him, but the anxious Uehara-kun refused to pass his turn to me.

After tidying up his stuff, he looked at Chiaki once more. The blushing Chiaki straightened her back.

... Oh, right. Isn't it better to clarify that Uehara-kun has a girlfriend?

Eh, it's weird to introduce it like this too... Right? Being too concerned would make him uncomfortable instead... But making it clear early would be better... No, I don't need to worry, yup.

I forgot about the matter with Aguri-san and thought about my own things. And so, Uehara-kun smiled at Chiaki.

"Bye, Hoshinomori. Sorry about making you join us out of the blue."

"N-No, not... at all..."

Chiaki lowered her gaze bashfully-- At this moment, the face of Aguri-san looking this way changed... Ah.

Uehara-kun mentioned that he invited Chiaki himself... And it is

obvious that the blushing Chiaki likes him...

As I was feeling uneasy, Uehara-kun continued saying with a cool smile:

"But it was fun. It's interesting listening to you talk about gaming."

"Uwah, Erm... Erm... Thank you..."

Chiaki answered bashfully. Aguri-san was obviously shaken as she started trembling. Eh, wait, t-this situation...

I wanted to warn Uehara-kun, but seeing a scene of jealousy for the first time made me panic and I couldn't find the words to say.

As I was still mulling over it-- Uehara-kun said the critical words with his best handsome guy smile.

"Oh right. Hoshinomori, your hairstyle is fine now, but judging from your hair texture, I think cutting it a bit shorter would suit you much more. After all-- you are already cuter than others just the way you are!"

Bang!

I could see a spray of shotgun pellets flying in all sorts of direction.

One of them was a bullet of love that pierced Chiaki's heart.

Another was a terrifying bullet that made me more anxious.

The last one was...

"....."

Ah! Aguri-san is going somewhere with unsteady steps--!

The last one was a bullet of sadness that opened a serious wound in Aguri-san's chest!

I checked Uehara-kun's face immediately. He had a brilliant smile, without any hint of ulterior motives. That was only natural, he wasn't planning anything nefarious.

This is the same pace when Uehara-kun gave me advice! After breaking into the high school social scene, he is sincerely cheering for Chiaki who is similar to me in his own way!

The lack of malevolent intent increased the power of that smile over 9000! It was enough to make Chiaki fall for him. If... If his girlfriend who felt a bit troubled because he felt distanced recently was to see this... It would be a kill shot if Aguri-san saw this!

"And Amano, see you tomorrow. Bye~~"

After saying his farewells, Uehara-kun prepared to leave coolly... Oh no, if he leave like this, he will meet with the depressed Aguri-san, and it might end horribly...!

"W-Wait!"

When I realized it, I already stood up and shouted loudly... I was also holding my bag and saying something that I shouldn't be saying:

"A-Aguri-san said she is not meeting you today!"

"...Huh?" "?"

Uehara-kun and Chiaki both tilted their heads in confusion. Uehara-kun asked:

"... Erm, Amano, why are you the one passing the message...?"

Shit, I didn't think this through clearly. But... But it would be problematic if the two of them met like this! I might not know much about love, but I could tell this! Most important of all... I think 70% of the fault behind this misunderstanding lies with me!

Deciding to see it through, I mustered my courage... and lied to

Uehara-kun.

"S-She has some matters to discuss with me today!"

"!"

Uehara-kun was stunned. Oh no, my lie was too outrageous. This was bad.

Thinking that saying anymore would expose my lie, I ran off hurriedly.

"B-Bye then! If you wish to, please continue to chat!"

"Ah, hey!" "Hmm? Wait wait..."

The two of them behind me was confounded. That was expected, even I felt this was weird!

A-Anyway, I need to find Aguri-san! I have to catch up with her!

I ran in the corridor hurriedly, but couldn't find Aguri anywhere. Worst of all, I didn't know anyway to contact her. If she contacted Uehara-kun and wanted to break up with him, that would be... Uwah! What did I do to my first precious friend I made in high school ahhh!

As I ran anxiously along the corridor, I suddenly noticed a prominent blonde beauty in the distance.

She noticed me too, and seemed to be shaken... After weighing the seriousness of the matter, I mustered up my courage and talked to her.

"Tendo-san!"

"A-Amano-kun. That previous time... Erm... I am probably mistaken..."

It was rare to see her stammering, but I didn't have time for that

now!

I asked flusteredly:

"Tendo-san! Did a girl just pass you by!? She looks like... How should I put it, dressed like a hottie, but it suits her well and feels rather cute..."

"Huh? Ah, yes there is. If you mean a girl that looks like that and seemed depressed, she was walking towards the school gate just now..."

"! Thank you!"

I ran after thanking her. However, Tendo-san who didn't understand the situation shouted a question towards my back:

"A-Amano-kun! Why are you chasing that girl!"

Why ask me? This was hard to explain. And I didn't have time right now.

I turned back as I ran, deciding to just tell her the key point.

"Simply put, it's a matter of the heart!"

"!"

...Eh, did I convey my intention well? Tendo-san stood there blankly and her bag fell onto the floor... Forget it, I didn't have time to explain. I guess Tendo-san only asked why I was in such a hurry out of courtesy, but was not really interested in my after school activity. Yup.

I kept sprinting at full speed. And finally, when I reached the school gate...

"Aguri-san!"

"?"

I caught up with Aguri who was changing her shoes, with no intention to wait for Uehara-kun.

Aguri glared at me as I panted, and muttered:

“Ah, the disgusting nerd who is interested in Tasuku...”

“So that’s how you see me!

No wonder she kept glaring at me from afar!

I was stunned, and Aguri-san looked at me with suspicious eyes... Ugh, I caught up to her, but I don’t know where to start. The entire matter needed to be explained from the very start, but he might think I was just speaking up for Tasuku because we were bros... Hmm... From the looks of things...

Making up my mind, I looked at Aguri-san’s... unexpectedly innocent face, and told her:

“W-W-Want to have some tea with me?”

"--- What?"

..... Recently, I felt like I have been chatting up girls a lot.

## **Uehara Tasuku**

“Fwah...”

I couldn’t help yawning for the upteen time. I usually walk or ride a bicycle for this stretch of road, but I took a bus today. There wasn’t anyone I know on the bus, and there was plenty of empty seats. I leaned my back heavily onto a seat, and sighed after closing my eyes.

I wasn’t sleeping enough recently, which was wrecking havoc on my body condition. If I needed to stand for a long time such as during school assembly, it might get dangerous. All of this was...

Amano’s fault...



Negative emotions that seemed sort of similar to the ones I felt towards him before welled up in me. Worst of all, the games he recommended were all interesting... No, I need to make a correction. Worst of all, except for the game made by 'NOBE', the games he recommended were all interesting. I was the type who would restrain myself in terms of entertainment, but when the RPG I was playing neared its end, I couldn't help pulling an all nighter to finish it off.

However, the reason why I didn't get enough sleep was different this time. It wasn't because of a game recommended by Amano, but because of Amano himself... In other words...

Just what did Amano and Aguri do together after school was out yesterday ahhhh!

I couldn't help holding my head, thinking about it again.

Basically, Amano and Aguri had no link at all, right!? No, or did they knew each other much earlier?

Aguri used to be a plain girl, and Amano seemed to have friends back in middle school... Ah, they might know each other. But, were they from the same middle school?

B-But usually, they will make that clear from the get go. Since they never mentioned it, they probably don't know each other... No, thinking about it from another angle, are their relationship so deep that they can't be open about it!?

The difficult question that would even stump Google sensei made me down in the dumps. I knew I couldn't figure it out no matter how much I think about it, but that was why I couldn't help thinking.

The easiest way would be asking one of them... But, that was really scary.

The reason was, after I parted with Hoshinomori quickly yesterday, I wandered the streets after leaving school to kill the time I suddenly had...

And I saw it.

I saw Amano and Aguri-- hanging out happily in a cafe!

The couple chatting cheerfully were people I knew, Amano and Aguri! That's wrong! It's too weird! Amano going to a cafe together with a girl was already a sign of the apocalypse! And he just have to be with Aguri...

To be honest, I really thought that the world was about to end. For me, that was how outrageous that scene was... And made me speculate.

Normally, even if I didn't ask, Aguri will keep using messages or LINE to report to me her everyday life. But not only was her message's content meagre today, she had completely glossed over the fact about her outing with Amano.

And so, I couldn't ask Aguri about it either... In the end, that incident yesterday kept replaying in my mind.

The route to my school flashes past the window. I will reach school soon. To calm myself before meeting my schoolmates, I told myself:

I-It's fine. Amano and Aguri would definitely not NTR me. Even if they have contacts, it would revolve around me. Anyway... it's probably the sensitive Amano overthinking things and then approached Aguri. Speaking of which, he was acting weird yesterday...

That's right that's right, what a logical deduction. This was definitely it.....

No, wait. Some time ago, didn't I thought that Amano and Aguri seemed similar at their cores? Did the two of them... hit it off? ... Ha, haha, how is that possible. The Aguri I like is so frivolous, she won't be interested in Amano...

When I thought this far, I felt electricity flowing down my spine.

Wait... Aguri fell for the past me right? The past me... In other words, the nerdy me who plays games happily... I was really similar to Amano back then!

When I realized it, the bus already stopped at my school's stop. I got down and drifted towards the campus like a spirit.

... N-No no no, that was impossible...

"Hmm, strange? Tasuku?"

"!"

A familiar voice came from behind me. I was surprised and turned back exaggeratedly.

The one before me was Aguri herself who looked surprised.

Before I could react, she rushed to my side with a happy smile.

"Wah~~ how rare for me to meet Tasuku in the morning!"

"T-T-That's right. M-Morning, Aguri."

"Yes, morning~~ Tasuku. Fufufu~~"

Aguri said as she walked beside me. I wanted to walk naturally just like usual... But my joints were strangely stiff.

H-How do I usually walk?

As Aguri grew suspicious, I threw out a topic hurriedly:

"O-Oh right, what did you do yesterday, Aguri?"

"Huh?"

Ah...

I asked before thinking, but in retrospect, that was a landmine. An

absolutely disastrous choice! It's not like I was Amano! As I broke out in cold sweat, Aguri... Aguri seemed a little shaken, and averted her eyes quietly.

“Erm, that... y-yesterday I suddenly felt like having tea with my friend, s-sorry, Tasuku.”

“Ah, r-right. You mentioned that in your message...”

“R-Right...”

"....."

What was with her strange reaction! The doubts in my heart were gushing out! The truth was, Amano said himself that he was meeting Aguri, but it wasn't clear if they had prepared their testimony ahead of time. Aguri only told me she went for tea with her friend, but refuse to say that friend was Amano.... What the hell, I feel so conflicted!

W-W-What's going on!?! So it's really... What I think it is!?

In my heart, the theory that 'Aguri had a thing for Amano' was quickly taking shape.

Eh, Amano wasn't a bad guy... His looks were fine too... And he seemed to be the faithful kind... even the famous Tendo fell for him, an unexpectedly manly character... Wait.

Strange! Is Amano's that good a catch!?! Is he having it good? No... That's not true right?

I didn't know what's happening anymore.

After we reached the school gate, we changed into indoor shoes, then walked towards the second year classrooms together. After this short period of silence, Aguri suddenly said to me with a rare tense expression:

“Tasuku, w-what did you do after school... yesterday?”

“Huh? M-Me?”

The question was too sudden, which made my heart waver. I still recalled what happened yesterday, and reported honestly:

“Well... I chatted with Hoshinomori and Amano... Ah, then Amano left first...”

“Ahem, a-after that...?”

“After that... Oh right, I don’t think you know her, the Hoshinomori I mentioned is a girl from Class A.”

“I-Is that so... W-What kind of girl is she?”

Aguri was interested in Hoshinomori for some reason... I could understand if she wants to talk about Tendo or Amano... but she wants to learn about Hoshinomori who was completely unrelated to her? Strange.

“What kind of girl... Well, looks gloomy at first, nerdy, and have an aura of not having any friends...”

“O-Oh... Is that so...”

Aguri suddenly flicked her hair, and she looked a little smug...?

“Ah, but after actually talking to her, she is actually a nice person, and is interesting to talk about gaming with her. Also, she is the classical hidden gem, the type that loses to others because she doesn't dress up.”

“... I see~~... Ahah... hah...”

Aguri became depressed again for some reason. Was she jealous? Eh, that was unlikely. After all, she even said I was compatible with Tendo, a girl who was frivolous about love. I might be her boyfriend, but she wouldn't be that dedicated to me...

“? Hmm? Tasuku, why are you depressed?”

“No... I’m not.”

I averted my gaze. Oh no... I was exposed. Feeling lonely because my girlfriend didn’t care about me, that’s too sissy! But, I couldn’t help it, I feel that... Aguri looked really cute recently.

" ....."

Our conversation ended abruptly... After being with Aguri for half a year, this was the first time this happened.

Could it be... This was...

T-The signs of an eminent breakup!?

I was sweating bullets in my heart. I often heard others speak of such a situation. A couple didn’t have anything they dislike about each other, but their relationship still felt uneasy, and they break up in the end. Was this it? Something like love burnout period?

With an incredibly tense heart, we came to the corridor leading to the Second Years’ classrooms.

-- The next moment, an unfamiliar girl talked to me.

“Er... E-Erm, Uehara-san!”

"Huh?"

The female student before Aguri and me was a beautiful girl that was a sight for sore eyes.

She had an innocent looking face, exceptional figure and she her uniform was put on in a sloppy but fashionable manner. She had a lazy charm about her, and her slightly curly hair was enchanting-Hold on.

“Huh, could you be... H-Hoshinomori?”

Nods furiously! “Y-Yes.”

The sunny beauty smiled amiably... H-Hey hey.

I did say that cutting her hair shorter would suit her better, and also told her she didn't need to wear her uniform too tidily... To think it would be so drastic a change...

To be honest, I was scratching my face a little troubledly. Both male and female schoolmates around us had their eyes our way. Aided by the feeling of freshness, she was as prominent as Tendo. I turned, and saw that Aguri was stupefied too.

Hoshinomori seemed to be shy about my gaze and lowered her head quietly... Ah, she might look amazing, but she was still Hoshinomori on the inside.

“Ehh... s-sorry.”

"Huh? Why are you apologizing?"

“E-Erm, changing my style like this is a little too reckless... It must feel revolting, right? I carried out all the advice you gave yesterday... B-But, I just want to give it a try...”

“I-I see...”

Yup, that was totally Hoshinomori on the inside. Her self-esteem was too low, just like Amano. I couldn't stand it, the two of them had similar experiences and had similar personality, so why couldn't they get along better? If they just made a compromise about 'MOE', they would really be a one true pair-- hold on.

If Amano and Hoshinomori got together like this...

Would Aguri's heart return to me? I shook my head when I thought about this. The hell was I thinking? That's too scummy. That's not the problem, right? Really, then what about Tendo? Seeing her like this, I hope she ends up with Amano too... Eh, no no, why

should I worry which heroine Amano picks?! And that wasn't all there was to this, right!?

I didn't get it myself either. I was showing symptoms of catching a cold, probably from the lack of sleep, my entire face will heat up when I get agitated. I couldn't stand it...

-- At this moment, I realized that Aguri glanced towards my face, and then shuffled towards her class as if she was in a trance... Strange.

I wanted to call out to Aguri, but Hoshinomori didn't seem to realize that I knew Aguri, and continued talking to me.

"Neh neh...Uehara-san. Is it fine... for me to change my style like this? W-Well, aside from my classmates, even my parents and younger sister asked me 'w-who are you?'..."

In the end, Hoshinomori couldn't tell if these reactions were good or bad. Was there even a need to say this? I couldn't stand it, just how low was these people's self esteem...?

"Well, there aren't any problems, it suits you very well, Hoshinomori. Especially your haircut, it is great. Amano won't call you seaweed head anymore."

"I-Is that so? Hehe... T-Thank you!"

Seeing the bashful smile of the more confident Hoshinomori... looks like she will be popular.

-- As we were chatting about various things, Amano approached gradually from behind Hoshinomori. I raised a hand to acknowledge Amano, and he greeted me from afar: "Morning, Uehara-san ~ ~" ... But he didn't stop at all and headed towards Class F.

When Amano passed us by, he said softly with a mocking laugh at Hoshinomori:



“Dry seaweed.”

"What--!"

Using the chance while Hoshinomori was getting mad, Amano dashed into the classroom. J-Just how much does he hate Hoshinomori!?

Hoshinomori wanted to rebuke him, but entering Class F... Entering another class in the morning made her hesitate, and she could only stomp her feet vexingly.

“W-What is w-wrong with him! Uehara-san, why are you friends with Keita!?”

“Huh...? Why are we friends... B-Because he lends me games?”

“What a superficial friendship!”

Hoshinomori complained to me about Amano for a short while, but after the bell rang, she bowed to me and hurried towards Class A.

I entered the classroom too, thinking in a daze as I went to my seat.

But... Didn't Hoshinomori notice? Amano only saw her back, but he managed to recognized her before coming to tease her.

Hoshinomori who changed her style was so different that even her family didn't recognize her. But Amano still treated her the same way, as expected of Amano--

I thought while harbouring this strange sense of respect.

...In the end, my mind was clotted by the relations between Aguri and Amano.

“Y-You are making games?”

“Y-Y-Yes.”

Hoshinomori lowered her head shyly as she sat on a bench inside a park near the school, while sipping on tea flavoured soya drink through a straw.

I watched her from the side, thinking: Hmm, what in the world am I doing?

It had been a week since Hoshinomori changed her style, and I realized that I was like a consultant to her.

Well, in the beginning, I just thought of it as an after sales service after she changed her looks drastically, and it would just be discussing with Hoshinomori what sort of fashionable accessories would fit her style. But the content of our dialogue gradually shifted to her worries and complaints about Amano (Which were present all along).

On the other hand, Aguri didn't spend much time with me, and I suddenly had free time after school. That was why I ended up accompanying Hoshinomori who was bored stiff waiting for her bus.

A week went by just like that, until today.

Hoshinomori revealed her interest in creating games, and the content of our discussion finally went beyond the realm I could manage.

"That's why, e-erm, I want to ask Uehara-san for advice about making games..."

"Ah~~....."

Well, I was happy that someone was relying on me, but discussing this with me was strange, right? After I finished the 200ml 'tri-arrow' brand soda, I slammed the can to the side and said:

"I-I want to tell you, Hoshinomori..."

"Y-Yes, what is it, Uehara-san!?"

Hoshinomori looked up at me with sparkling eyes... Oh no, she had grown really intimate with me before I realized it.

I backed off a little and told her:

"If you want to discuss about gaming, you should know someone who is more suitable than me-"

"... Pui!"

"Is it so repulsive that you had to spit with an abhorrent face that completely spoils your image!?"

Well, Hoshinomori didn't really spit, but she conveyed her unwillingness to me very clearly.

I couldn't help sighing.

"Hey, you two can definitely get along better, right? Why are you so stubborn about this?"

When Hoshinomori heard my question, she crushed the soya package in her hand and said:

"This isn't being stubborn, it's a problem of not backing down and insisting on one's pride."

"Yes, that is exactly what being stubborn means."

"I-I-I don't care about Keita at all. I don't feel anything about him, and don't want to get involved with him. I hope he will transfer schools to an alternate world."

"Such a development would probably make him happy."

"B-But, Uehara-san... Do you know how far he had progressed with 'Aegis VIII'? I-I'm just curious..."

"You are super concerned about him!"

"I-I-I am not concerned about him! I just want to clear the game before he does, then gather all the rare weapons, armour and collectibles, then show it off to him arrogantly!"

"That's why I said you are super concerned about him! Hoshinomori, you wouldn't compete with others on how fast you clear games!"

When I pressed her, Hoshinomori probably realized she was being irrational, so she took out her phone and pretended to answer to an incoming message... Basically, she didn't have friends that would send her messages, just like Amano, right... I leaned in and peered, and found Hoshinomori playing a social game as expected... Hmm, wait? Strange, this game was...

"Amano also play this....."

"What~~?"

"Ah, no, it's nothing."

Hoshinomori turned to me with an annoyed look, so I pretended to be retarded. As she fiddled with her games, I peeked at it... And so--

Ah, as expected, that's the game Amano was playing. Just how compatible are the two of you...

It was to the extent that they should just get married. Why did they have to fight over something as stupid as 'Moe'? God was cruel... No, these two were just too retarded.

As I blankly watch Hoshinomori play her game, I realized Amano received the help request Amano mentioned last time. The other party's name... was some guy called 'Tsucchan'... Hmm? I saw this player's name somewhere before...

My brain seemed to be stuck onto something as I continued watching Hoshinomori play. She seemed to have accepted the request. On the confirmation page, I saw Hoshinomori's player

name.

She is 'MONO' huh... Oh~~... 'MONO' huh. 'MONO'...?

“Wahh! Huh! U-Uehara-san?”

I couldn't help grabbing Hoshinomori shoulder from behind, and she turn around flusteredly with a blushed face. I let go with a “S-Sorry” but I couldn't help asking her:

"H-Hoshinomori. That game... You... are using... the nick name 'MONO'... to play this?”

“Hmm? Ah, yes, that's right...”

“And then... Erm... The 'Tsucchan' that requested for your help... is a player you had known for a long time?”

“Ah, y-yes. Well, this type of game basically have shallow interactions limited to within the games, but this person will always help me at the most crucial time, and is very righteous. For someone like me who don't have friends in real life... He is probably one of the few people who understands me... Ah, e-erm, maybe you think it is weird that despite having never spoken with him... I still described him in such exaggerated terms...”

".....Tsh~~~"

"U-Uehara-san?"

I took a deep breath. Even though this was in public... Despite of that, I still stood up from the bench, walked to the front of Hoshinomori and grabbed her shoulders tightly with both hands. I looked at her seriously in the eyes-- I couldn't stop myself from yelling:

"This is too compatible a match ahhhhh!!!!!!"



"! Huh hmmm? W-What's wrong!"

Hoshinomori was scared stiff. Her face was red from embarrassment because she misunderstood something, she even averted her eyes. But I really couldn't spare the thoughts for that.

I was agitated, but I still lowered my voice and asked her with renewed seriousness:

"L-Let me ask you, be honest, how do you feel about Amano!?"

"Huh? I hate him more than an idol forcefully slotted into my favourite drama series by some agency."

She answered without hesitation. I grabbed my head and yelled:

"But why!?"

"Huh? No no no! I should be asking what's wrong with you!?"

"Fall in love! At a time like this, you should go and experience love! Isn't a happy ending obviously in sight!?"

"What~~! No no no, no matter how I think about it, this is a bad ending for me!"

"... Ah! Damn it, so when someone enhanced by the traits of a main character, possess despairing low potential to be a main character, the situation becomes this retarded!"

"... Eh~~ E-Erm Uehara-san? W-Want some soya?"

When I realized it, Hoshinomori appeared to be spooked by my weird actions, and was even offering some of her soya. I turned her down as I decided I do need to cool my head, and sat back onto the bench.

After spending some time to regulate my breathing, I spent some time thinking about it before telling Hoshinomori:

"Hoshinomori. I want to confirm again... You don't have the tsundere type of feeling for Amano at all...?"

"Absolutely not. If I am stuck on a deserted island with him, I would rather kill myself."

"That so..."

She refused with serious eyes. After hearing her opinion, I reviewed my strategy.

It is easy to explain such a fated situation to them... But from the looks of things, even if I clear up the situation, that might just make them hate each other, so what is the right move...

Well, although I was an outsider, I still feel frustrated when such a 'regrettable' situation was placed before me. It was the same as Tendo's incident, it really felt like I was cheering for the main character and heroine of a manga or light novel. It was really interesting.

I looked at Hoshinomori, and she seemed a little concerned about me. But the deadline for aid request was probably reaching, so she placed her eyes on her phone and fiddled with it.

Anyway, let me test her out first.

"Hoshinomori... Well... Oh right, why do you call yourself 'MONO'?"

"Huh? Ah, I get it, you are asking why I choose this name? It's very simple."

"Simple? Ah, did you pick a part of 'Hoshinomori' and read it backwards--"

"No no no, it's because my mother's family name was 'Mononobe', and I used the first kanji, 'MONO'. As you know, everyone would prefer to choose an online handle that isn't too close to their real life



self, right? Ah, that's why I used the other part of the name 'NOBE' as my online name. I use it mainly for game creation."

"Being this compatible is too incredulous aaaaahhhh!"

I stood up and yelled again, which shocked Hoshinomori once again. The parents who brought their kids to the park also pulled some distance from me.

I immediately lowered my head in apology, saying "Ah, sorry" and then sat down, but my emotions remained hyped up. "‘NOBE’ huh!? So you are ‘NOBE’! What is this situation!"

Hoshinomori probably completed the help request mission and kept her phone, her eyes were fretful as I had given her a fright. I cleared my throat with a cough and asked once more:

"Hoshinomori. Can't you feel any... charm from Amano as a man?"

"Before talking about Keita's charm as a man, I don't even acknowledge him as a human."

"You are actually that repulsed by him!?"

What was with the two of them!? Could one person hate another to such an extent!?

"Except for a certain point, your hobby and interest completely aligns..."

"That is the reason! His experience is so similar to mine... but he still supports 'Moe'! I am bewildered by that taste of his! It's like I am seeing my own dark side!"

"...Ah~~..."

Simply put, this was the highest level of the inverse of 'opposite attracts'. Because they had so many things in common, there would be an intense standoff if they arrive at different conclusion from these

experiences.

I scratched my head hard.

Oh no, from the looks of things, their grudge was too deep. And from the Gamers Club incident, it was clear how much unnecessary pride these two had. In that case... No matter how fated this seems, nothing good will come from revealing this! But if the two of them avoided each other and loses touch, it will be really...

Despite all these fated situation linking them together, it would be ridiculous for them to drift apart! Too ridiculous! But if this goes on, they would definitely not persist on meeting each other.

As I racked my brains and failed to think of a way, Hoshinomori probably switched the subject out of consideration for me:

“E-Erm, like I said, about the game creation...”

“That’s right... We were talking about that.”

As I thought about the ways to pair Amano with Hoshinomori, I listened to Hoshinomori expound further.

She took small sips of her soya milk and said:

“In the beginning, I will create simple games and publish them online because it’s my hobby... B-But, how should I put this? My reviews aren’t that great...”

“Yes I know. You are ‘NOBE’ after all...”

Hoshinomori— look so docile, but she was actually so evil on the inside... As I sighed, Hoshinomori looked at me with surprise:

“U-Uehara-san, y-you know about the games I made! Even though it is so niche!?”

“? Ah, I only played one game from the beginning to the end. As for why I played...”

At this moment, I considered about telling her the entire thing with Amano.

However, Hoshinomori looked at me with sparkling eyes.

“I-I think this is destined to be!”

“You are going with that!?”

Wrong! It might be destined to be, but the subject wasn’t me! I wanted to clarify with Hoshinomori, but I found it hard to mention about Amano with how happy she looked. Anyway, I will make a simple confirmation.

“Well, Hoshinomori, assuming... this is just an assumption. Assuming Amano knew that you are a game creator and played the free game you made...”

“... I will let the crows feast on my living body and return to nature.”

Her eyes were serious. I held my head in exasperation.

W-What is the right thing to do here!? Objectively speaking, Amano and Hoshinomori are each other’s destined partner! If they keep drifting apart, that would be too ridiculous. If they carry on like this, they won’t get together even if all the other conditions are fulfilled...

As I was racking my brains over this in vain, Hoshinomori continued her discussion with me:

“Eh, Uehara-san, what do you think about the game I... ‘NOBE’ made?”

“Huh? Ah~~... Well... How should I put this... i-it is very original--”

“Ah, that will be enough.”

Hoshinomori probably realized something and shirked away. The

two of you were only sensitive about such things!

She sighed deeply.

“In the beginning, I only made games for my own interest. I didn’t plan to show anyone, and just want to make a game that only belongs to me.”

“Ah, everyone will have such thoughts. Like drawing your own manga or writing a novel.”

“T-That’s right. When the game is finished, I became emotionally invested in the product. And so, I tried releasing the game online... After that, I received some praises and a few comments, which made me become cocky from happiness. And so, I started making a second and third game...”

“Isn’t it fine if you enjoyed the experience?”

“Enjoyed, huh... I admit that I enjoyed myself...”

At this moment, Hoshinomori pursed her lips. It appears that this was the part she wanted to talk about.

“B-But... Recently, I don’t know anymore. Because the games I designed in the way I like... Erm, is like the one played...”

“The reviews aren’t great.”

Of course her work won’t get acknowledged. It was too unique.

“B-But, when I designed the content with the criticism of others in mind... the results are...”

“Rave reviews.”

Hoshinomori nodded. Right, I think Amano mentioned this before. Amongst the game made by ‘NOBE’, the second one was relatively normal, and even made it into the top rankings.

Hoshinomori smiled wryly.

“W-Well, I know that I am not a great creator, so it’s strange for me to worry about it so much. But even so, I still can’t find the right answer. In the end, I just kept doing the things I like... And ended up with mediocre reviews.”

“Since you like to make games, that is also fine, right?”

“... Things would be simple if I just resign myself like that. But after experiencing praises that one time... I can’t forget the exuberance I felt...”

“Why not make games that others would like?”

“I-I made the second game with that in mind. However, I didn’t feel that strong sense of happiness even though I got praised by others...”

“Well, in a sense, that would be like denying your original style...”

“T-That’s right! Erm, it’s not like I don’t feel happy at all. In fact, I was very depressed when my third game tanked. B-But, I believe that my real style will be accepted one day and I have been working hard all this while. However...”

“It’s still not going smoothly huh?”

“Y-Yes. That’s why, I am thinking whether I should make another orthodox game.”

“T-This feels like an endless hellish cycle.”

All creators in the world had been caught in such a dilemma to some extent. But there was no right answer to this. Frankly speaking, I think it was fine either way and urged Hoshinomori to continue:

“And then.”

“B-But, actually, I have a strange fan who said... He likes the style

of the real me.”

“... Ah... That guy is probably ‘Yamasan’ right?”

I mentioned the online handle Amano mentioned on a whim. Hoshinomori confirmed that.

“? Hmm? How did you... Ah, r-right, I remember. You saw the comment section of my blog, right? Yes, you are right.”

Eh, enough, why aren’t the two of you dating yet? Just how many places did the red string of fate bond the two of you? Was that red string a flawed product or kinked somewhere?

Hoshinomori said with a straight face:

“So I was thinking, if I made a proper game... wouldn’t that be betraying ‘Yamasan’? That’s why I want to discuss this with someone. Uehara-san, t-tell me, what do you think I should do?”

“Go ask Amano!”

That would solve everything! But Hoshinomori seemed to think this was a joke, and was annoyingly gleeful when she said: “Uehara-san, you are doing that again~~” Ugh, even her inability to gauge distance was the same as Amano!

Honestly, what should I do-- I renewed my thoughts.

Even if I ignore ‘Yamasan’, Amano would be more suited to discuss such game related troubles. But Hoshinomori would never consult him about it. However, it would be wonderful if their relationship improves after talking about this. On one hand, I want to support Tendo’s love, and if I somehow dragged Hoshinomori in, it might even ignite Tendo’s jealousy.

In a corner of my heart a fair away from these thoughts, I was really bothered by Amano and Aguri’s relationship. But with no good way to unearth the facts, I could only stare at the issue anxiously.

Also, I had just been spending time with Amano or Hoshinomori recently. Frankly speaking, my status as a normie in class was getting dangerous, and there was another issue I had to be careful about...

Sigh~~ is there any good way for me to resolve all my frustrations and troubles I accumulated in the past week in one go?

I looked around the park blankly as I harboured a hope that was as good as relying on God.

In the distance were kids playing in the sand pit, while the housewives busied themselves chatting to the side. On the open plaza beside the park were several elderlies engrossed in a social game of Croquet... What a serene sight. The atmosphere in the Gamers Club sounded really strict. This scene was its exact opposite!

“.....”

-- Inspiration struck in an instant.

“... That’s it...”

I jumped up from the bench.

“Huh?”

Hoshinomori tilted her head baffledly, as she watched me.

But I didn’t reply to her... No, I couldn’t reveal anything, I just looked at the scenery within the park seriously as I thought about my ‘heavenly revelation’.

Once again, I realized that it was a great move that could settle all my worries, and was terrifyingly effective.

I couldn’t help trembling in silence.

The next day.

“”Hobby group?””

After school was out, the synchronized voices of Amano and Hoshinomori echoed in Class 2F.

With the two of them intentionally sitting some distance apart from Amano's desk, I was standing with my chest puffed out alone. I announced loud enough for the few classmates who were still around to hear:

“Yes! Let the three of us form the ‘Gamers Hobby Group’!”

"".....Oh.""

The two of them who weren't too sure about this looked at each other troublingly.

Using this chance while they weren't fighting, I used the momentum to propose:

“The two of you are both interested in ‘gamers group’, but thinks that the Gamers Club is not what you are looking for.”

""...Oh.""

“In that case, we should create a new organization! Unlike the Gamers Club that holds club activities for everyone to hone their skills, but something more relaxed, a gaming group that makes having fun for its members the priority. That is... the ‘Gamers Hobby Group’ that I am trying to form!”

""Whoa~~.....""

The two nerds were probably influenced by my passion as they forgot their position and clapped for me softly... If I mediate for them in the middle, the two of them were unexpectedly easy to coerce.

I took a look, and found my classmates who were still around looking at us and whispering... Good good. This was one of my plan.

Me, Amano and Hoshinomori, such a combination feels weird and



would be very prominent. However, if I tie the three of us together under the name of a Hobby Group, the gazes directed at us would lessen! I can talk to them openly too!

That was the first advantage of forming the Hobby Group. As for the second advantage...

“Erm, Uehara-san?”

"What, Amano?"

Amano raised his hand meekly and asked with his head tilted:

"A Hobby Group... to do what exactly? Can't we just talk to you normally like before? A-After all, if we do as you suggested..."

When Hoshinomori heard his question, she raised her opinion too:

“E-Erm, me too, I just want to talk to Uehara-san like before. I am saying this because...”

And then, the two of them pointed at each other, and told me firmly:

““This one is annoying.””

“You two never change, huh!”

Could people really be that resistant to compromise!? I was completely impressed by them!

I was stumped, but still coughed and kept my cool, then explained to them calmly:

“That is the *raison d'être* of the Hobby Group.”

“”?”

"You two might share similar interests, but I am not forcing you to be friends. You would just be partaking in the Gamers Hobby Group's

activity. It is just an avenue for members to talk about gaming, and won't force them to get along with each other. So..."

"...! D-Debating to the end is permitted...!"

The fire of determination burned in their eyes... Yup, although I was hoping for this... They were idiots as expected.

However, I didn't show my stupefied expression, and continued with a devious smile:

"How about it, it's great isn't it? Because you hate each other... There must be plenty of times where you want to debate to your heart's content."

"Ughhhh..."

They looked at each other with almost the same movements, then turned their face away. They then looked my way and mumbled... The similarity of their thoughts was like a scene from a comedy. I was looking forward to their interaction in the Hobby Group.

Actually, this was the second advantage of forming the Hobby Group.

Even if the two of them squabble, this would ensure they would meet each other.

Even if they want to better their relationship, it would be impossible if they didn't have a place to converse. However, if they were not tied together with some reason, they would probably drift apart stubbornly. Even though they consider each other as eyesores... They were surprisingly concerned about each other. It would be too much to describe them as Tsundere, but they still wish to have the chance and reason to talk to each other.

Hence, I set up the 'Gamers Hobby Club', a small circle to link them together...

"".....Since you say so...""

Hook, line and sinker. I caught both of them. I'm a master baiter. Although the fishes were brainless.

With a smile of satisfaction, I sat down as I had more or less achieved my goals.

The two of them were sneaking peeks at each other, it felt as if they were keeping each other in check.

Amano raised another question:

"But... Can we form a Hobby Group with just the three of us?"

"Hmm? Ah, there needs to be a minimum number of people and a clear objective in order to form a club in our school, but we just need to submit some documents for a Hobby Group, and we are good to go. On the other hand, the school won't allocate any budget for us."

"I see. That's great, but..."

Hoshinomori finished Amano's sentence:

"S-So, it's just the three of us? Well, I don't like having too many people either... But..."

Sparks flew between Hoshinomori and Amano as they dueled with their eyes. I sighed and replied:

"No, I actually invited one more person. I haven't ask her to come in yet..."

As I was saying that, that person leaned her head into the classroom. While my classmate in Class F were stunned, I raised my hand and hollered: "Yo!" calling her in.

"Tendo, this way! You came at the right time!"

"Ah, Uehara-san. Sorry for being late. Cleaning duty took longer

than expected."

"T-Tendo-san?"

Amano immediately straightened his back... It seemed that his fear of Tendo was growing by the day.

Tendo had her usual perfect smile as she walked over, then politely bowed and greeted the two people who sat stiffly.

"Thank you everyone for inviting me to join the 'Gamers Hobby Group'. As I also had my own club activities, I haven't decided yet. But I will consider it seriously after joining today's session..."

She looked at Hoshinomori, at this juncture, and paused for some reason.

"....."

"Erm... T-Tendo-san."

"Tendo?"

Strange? What happened? Why was Tendo looking at Hoshinomori intently? They were from the same class... But they were not enemies or anything, right? Didn't seem like they had anything in common.

As everyone was baffled by this development, Tendo suddenly came to her senses and asked Hoshinomori:

"Erm... S-So Hoshinomori-san is also part of the Hobby Group."

"Y-Yes... Ah, I am sorry about turning down your invitation to the Gamers Club that time..."

Hoshinomori acted timidly. I overlooked this part, so it was my fault. But... The thing bothering Tendo didn't seem to be issue with the Gamers Club...

As I expected, Tendo alternated her glances between Amano and

Hoshinomori

Amano said hurriedly:

"Ah, I have to apologize too. I turned down the Gamers Club, but joined this group instead..."

"N-No. That is fine... Erm... as expected... T-The two of you would rather form the Gamers Hobby Group than join the Gamers Club because both of you are here...?"

""?""

Oh shit, so that's what this is!

I finally realized at this moment. It wasn't clear why... But Tendo thinks the two of them liked each other? Well, I did hope to spark off Tendo's jealousy, but she seemed to have been mistaken way before this.

I wanted to clear things up... But it was already too late.

After they were asked this vague question, the anxious Amano and Hoshinomori once again showed how in sync they were, and how they couldn't read the mood... They nodded firmly and answered:

"Ah, yes, that's right." Obviously answering without thinking.

Imbeciles ahhhhhhh!

Feeling the (non-existent) intimate relationship between the two of them, Tendo was shocked. What the hell was this situation?

As I was sweating buckets internally, the red faced Tendo averted her gaze and muttered:

"... A-As expected, the Gamers Hobby Group don't really need me..."

She is throwing a tantrum ahhhhhhhhh!

Oh no! I do hope she would be jealous, but not like this! Things could only develop after she joined the Gamers Hobby Group! Only then would there be a chance for Amano to get closer to either Tendo or Hoshinomori! Don't fail at such an early stage!

And honestly speaking, once the Hobby Group is formed, it will eat into Amano's after school time. He can start his romantic comedy with the two beauties, and won't have time to date Aguri! I can also use the Hobby Group activity as a reason to control plus monitor Amano's movements!

After affirming my plan, I decided that getting Tendo to stay was the priority and said:

"D-Don't decide so hastily, just try joining us for today..."

I was soothing things over midway when Amano made an insensitive statement:

"Ah, Uehara-san, that won't do. I hope Tendo-san can... concentrate on leading the Gamers Club!"

"Do you have to be so heartless aaaaahhhhhh!"

"?"

Amano tilted his head innocently. His words were equivalent to 'get the hell back to your Gamers Club', which made Tendo's face cramp. Such genius! Genius in hurting Tendo's ego!

Blinking away the bits of tears in my eyes, I soothe her calmly:

"A-Anyway, please take a seat, alright? Joining or not is another issue, j-just observe our activity okay!? Okay? It's fine, right?"

"Huh? Ah, that is fine... Eh, Uehara-san, were your actions this weird before?"

"Don't mind me!"

Of course my actions turned weird! What the hell was with this situation!? Recently, even I got confused over what the objective behind my actions was! What happened to my normie lifestyle?

Anyway, the four of us finally sat down around Amano's desk, and Amano was quietly feeling touched. It might just be the few of us, but to him, this was like a scene from his dreams. Having several people around his desk, such a situation... I felt like crying for him too.

When Tendo asked me: "And so? What's the activity for today?"

I glanced towards Hoshinomori, confirming with her with my eyes. After getting her final consent, I formally brought up the gaming topic for today.

"Hoshinomori is making a game right now, let's discuss the direction for her next work."

""Huh?""

Amano and Tendo looked at Hoshinomori in surprise. She mumbled the things she discussed with me yesterday shyly..... and omitted the part about her being 'NOBE'. She seemed to have done so because she didn't want Amano to play the games she made as she was sure Amano would belittle it... When the fact was...

"Oh~~Chiaki, you are making a game huh..... it must be really boring."

"What?"

Amano had a go at Hoshinomori as expected... No, the only fantastic fan of her would actually be you...

The scene of them two squabbling all the while shocked Tendo... Ah right, she thought the two of them were on great terms.

"They are always like this. Can't get along like fire and ice."

"I-I see..."

Tendo's mood improved and she smiled... You didn't even attempt to hide your liking for Amano huh. Or did she train in gaming too much and was unexpectedly inexperienced in love?

With the misunderstanding cleared for now, I felt more at ease. I broke up their fight and moved the topic forward:

"Alright, Tendo and Amano, what do you two think? Should Hoshinomori do what she likes? Or do what others want?"

"Do you even need to ask, don't hesitate and just do the things you like."

I didn't expect Tendo to answer so decisively. Hoshinomori asked timidly: "S-So that's the right answer after all?"

Tendo nodded and replied without any doubts:

"Of course. You have to follow through on your beliefs. Be it painting or literature, a real masterpiece is borne from such a selfish desire."

"I see I see... that is true."

"You must believe in yourself and work hard on your creation. Your skill and popularity will come naturally in the future."

"Y-Yes! E-Erm, I will work hard!"

Hoshinomori straightened her back and completely agreed with Tendo's opinion. Amano and I were impressed. This girl... Tendo was good. She might be a wreck when things involved Amano, but the girl at the top of Ootoki High was the real deal. Her opinion and attitude were unwavering, determined and strong.

However, that was why...

"... Ah~~~..."



The topic thus ended... No good, that was too perfect, Tendo Karen! What the hell! At least showboat a little! High school at a level higher than us-- for example, Hekiyō High school located near us, their student council will showboat in every meeting! So holding a fun discussion was impossible if someone so perfect was around! Today I learned! Awkward silence shrouded the place... Strange, were hobby group activities supposed to be like this...?

I knew this was irresponsible as I broke out in cold sweat, but I had no choice... but to push the topic to Amano.

“Right, t-then Amano, what do you think?”

"Huh!"

Amano glared at me as if to say: asking me after hearing such a perfect answer, how mean! ...Ugh, sorry, but... Amano, I have my troubles too!

On the other hand, Hoshinomori sensed Amano's crisis, and asked with an insidious smile:

"Ah~~ I want to know too, what does Keita who is famous for loving games think?"

"Ugh... Chiaki, you...!"

What an ugly fight! Tendo who was surprised by that scene asked me again:

“I-It seems that in all sorts of ways, these two have less compatibility than oil and water...”

“Well, I-I think they have their own unique relationship...”

I couldn't answer further. It was too unique in a negative sense.

Anyway, everyone fixed their attention onto Amano.

Amano glared back at Hoshinomori... then sighed in resignation

and scratched his head. After that, he answered in an unexpectedly relaxed manner:

“To be honest, I think either way is fine.”

“...Huh?”

His opinion was too casual, it would be too much to compare that with Tendo’s masterful comment.

Hoshinomori bashed him on this point:

“W-What is this. Keita... Y-You don’t care about the games I am making...?”

“Oh right, that too.”

“W-Why you...”

Sparks flew between them again. Tendo muttered to me: “They seem to be on great terms instead...” Yup, I felt the same, they were like a loving married couple who just happened to be fighting.

After Hoshinomori gave Amano a piece of her mind, he continued:

“But, even if it isn’t you, I think it would be fine too. To me, it doesn’t matter whether the creator wants his work to be popular or not. The important thing is how fun the product is.”

“With the way you put it, it’s as good as not saying anything...”

I mumbled, but Amano replied nonchalantly: “But I’m not wrong, correct?”

“Since there are cases where masterpieces arise by staying true to one’s conviction, there must be cases where entertaining elements got mixed in haphazardly and the finished product is still incredibly fun. Vice versa.”

“W-What is that? Keita, d-don’t you have anything you want from

the game creators you like?"

"Huh? That's right. That's how it is."

"....."

His lack of ambition was completely opposite to that of Tendo, and even made us feel stupefied. However... Amano continued: That's why,"

"Chiaki, just do it the way you like, ok? Even if you want it to be superficially popular, that is still your work. Isn't that so?"

"Huh?"

His words seemed to make Hoshinomori realize something, Tendo and I also listened carefully to Amano's view.

"Chiaki, since the project made by sticking to your conviction is your work, isn't the game made in order to gain popularity also the fruits of your labour? Are these two that different?"

"Well..."

Hoshinomori was a little shaken and averted her gaze. But Amano probably felt his opinion was too shallow compared to Tendo, so he glanced at Tendo and scratched his head shyly.

He explained to Tendo politely, with a completely different attitude from the way he treated Hoshinomori.

"Ah, I also like the games made by a certain free game creator. If I have to say what I like about him, it would be the personality that could be discerned from the details of the game. That's why... Even if that creator wants to gain more superficial popularity, I think the core parts would remain the same no matter what he does. In that case, I would definitely like it too, that's how I feel."

"....."

"S-Sorry, I must have sounded really shallow... Eh, I-I don't care about the lousy game Chiaki made anyway..."

"Ehhhh!"

Hoshinomori glared at Amano, but strangely, her eyes weren't that hostile.

Tendo too, despite her opinion being the polar opposite of Amano, she was smiling warmly.

"I see... you are right. I finally know now. Yes, Amano-kun... That's the sort of person you are."

"Huh? Ah, s-sorry..."

Amano was completely intimidated... Ah, he seemed to have misunderstood! Tendo was obviously showing a face of admiration! Why did you interpret it as you being scolded? Basically, this guy was too sensitive; plus, he has an inferiority complex!

... Well, the atmosphere was unexpectedly cordial, I thought it was about time.

"Well then, let's call it a day."

After saying that, the other three nodded without any objection. When I realized it, the classroom was empty save for us.

When everyone was ready to leave after packing up, I said to Tendo:

"So how about it, Tendo? What do you plan to do? Do you want to... join the 'Gamers Hobby Group?'"

When Tendo heard my question, she glanced towards Amano hesitantly... Yup just one more push. I didn't want to let Amano and Hoshinomori hear this, so I went closer to Tendo and whispered:

"Oh right, Amano started talking to Hoshinomori because of you,

Tendo."

"Huh?"

"He wants to talk to you with an attitude of an equal in the future, so he is working to improve himself. He found someone who likes gaming to practice his talking. Sigh... And it became like this."

"I-I see. H-He did this in order to... speak properly with me..."

Tendo's face turned a deeper shade of red.

Alright... the last fish is hooked

I smiled deviously. As I expected, Tendo answered timidly:

"T-That's fine. I had fun today too... Then I will split my time between these two groups, and join your--"

Phew, I could finally relax. Going by this pace, if the Hobby Group progresses well, Amano will become a pair with one of them-- Hmm, strange? Over there was...

"Aguri? What's the matter?"

When I realized it, Aguri was already at the entrance of Class F. I stopped my conversation with Tendo and asked Aguri, but she seemed to be surprised. She then looked at me awkwardly and greeted me weirdly: "Tasuku... Gwoo day~~" She then looked at Tendo and Hoshinomori--

"...Ughh!"

"?"

Aguri suddenly turned teary...? What? What was that...

Well, I didn't arrange to meet Aguri today, but she still came to pick me up. In that case, I should hurry and tidy up--

“Eh, come here come here! Amano-chi! Amano-chi! Hurry up!”

“Ah, alright Aguri-san! S-Sorry! E-Everyone, I have some business with her, so I will be going now!”

Amano who was summoned by Aguri hurried over after packing up. Tendo and I were speechless, while the two person meeting at the entrance...

“U-Ugh~~! A-Amano-chi~~!”

“P-Please calm down, Aguri-san! A-Anyway, let’s go!”

".....Huh?"

The teary Aguri stucked intimately to Amano, then left quickly.

"....."

Compared to the lost Tendo and me--

Hoshinomori was not surprised by this strange situation at all as she calmly packed her things. She even said something impactful to our backs:

“B-But, sometimes fact is stranger than fiction. To think that... Keita can find such a cute girl to be his girlfriend. Don’t you think so, Uehara-san?”

".....What?"

With our necks as stiff as robots, Tendo and I turned back with a creak.

Hoshinomori replied with her head tilted:

“Recently, I saw them together when I go home. The two of them seem close. A-Also, Keita himself said that she is his girlfriend.”

".....What?"

“I find it hard to accept. It’s a pity for that girl to be matched with Keita. Keita should be matched with a nerdy girl who likes games instead... Huh? Strange, what am I saying? Ah, I need to wait for the next bus! Bye bye!”

"... G-Good bye..."

Hoshinomori left quickly. Tendo and I were left in the classroom, and we looked at each other.

Tendo clutched her bag tightly.

With tears welling in her eyes... She suddenly ran off with a yell:

"I-I’m not joining the ‘Gamers Hobby Group’ after all~~~~~!"

“I can guess that much!”

I didn’t even want to smooth things out! Of course! Or rather, instead of inviting Tendo...

“I am thinking about withdrawing from the ‘Gamers Hobby Group’ myself! W-What is happening!? What is this!?”

That day after school, when I formed the Gamers Hobby Group and thought I could resolve all my problems in one go.

Thinking back, this day was the start of all the complicated relationships.

Yup back then-- I already had an ominous feeling about it.

Amano Keita

How did things turn out this way?

"Hick... Ughhh..... Ughh....."

"A-Aguri-san, sorry. It’s all because I am too useless..."

A boy and a girl sat face to face with painful expressions inside a family restaurant. The girl had been crying for a while now, while the boy lowered his head apologetically. No matter how one diced it, this appeared to be a scene of a breakup.

Well, in a sense, that's true...

I took iced coffee from the beverage bar and poured it down my parched throat... Students from Ootsuki don't frequent here, the beverages were cheap and the family restaurant itself was fine... But the accusatory gazes made me uncomfortable.

Aguri's slightly heavy makeup was ruined by her tears... To be honest, she looked cuter without makeup, but I knew very well that this wasn't the right time to say that, and swallowed these words with my iced coffee... Yup, that wasn't the way to cheer up a girl who was troubled by love...

"Ah, Aguri-san, I think you look cuter without makeup."

I said it anyway. D-Don't underestimate how limited my conversation topics with girls were!

And of course, Aguri glared at me fiercely.

"Annoying! Disgusting! How uncouth!"

"T-That's right~~"

I averted my gaze and took a sip of iced coffee... The gaze from the other people hurt me even more. The office lady seated behind me even reacted with disgust. I felt like crying.

"... Sigh... This is the worst..."

That might be so, but I managed to stop Aguri-san from crying after saying that.

She drank the coke I got her then admonished me: "Not cold!"



... Well, you left it at the side after I got it all this while ago...

"Please take this."

When I realized it, I quickly served a new drink to her. The coke she didn't want to drink because it wasn't cold anymore was now my responsibility. And of course, I would be lectured if I indirectly kiss with her, so I used a straw.

Aguri drank the iced honey melon soda, exhaled, then looked my way after rubbing away her tears.

"... Tell me, why are those girls there...?"

"...Eh..."

I averted my gaze. The group of office ladies behind me started whispering: "What a jerk."

Yup... Our conversation do sound like I got caught having an affair, as if we were intentionally misleading them. Sigh, i-in a sense, such an interpretation was 30% right.

With sweat oozing from my forehead, I reported what happened today.

"Erm... For some reason, Chiaki and Tendo-san were invited to join a Hobby Group..."

"Why did things turn out this way~~!"

"That hurts hurts hurts! Don't pull my ear! Aguri-san! Be conscious about the people around us!"

Aguri-san pulled my ear hard, then said while panting like a beast:

"Amano-chi, what did you tell me last time!? You said there is nothing going on between Hoshinomori Chiaki and Tasuku! You also said that Tasuku doesn't like boys, he only likes me!"

"I-I did say that..."

"And because you promised to support our pairing, I was in a good mood and even treated you to a drink that day too!"

"You did treat me... but it was cheap and you only treated me once..."

"What!"

"Nothing!"

"Then why... why did things become worse after that day~~!"

"W-Why...?"

That was what I want to ask. What was this situation? Why did it turn out like this?

Well, I should make this clear first to avoid misunderstandings. In the beginning, I believe from the bottom of my heart that Uehara-san and Aguri-san love each other. It was obvious, Aguri-san kept raving about her love for Uehara-san... And Uehara-san seemed to cherish her too.

However, the situation became weird one week ago. In other words... Chiaki made her debut.

Aguri-san complained for god knows how many times today.

"Basically, Amano's predictions were all off from the very start! Saying Hoshinomori Chiaki isn't a looker, and has a passive personality..."

"I-I did say that... B-Because she was not--"

"And the next day, she turned into a stunning beauty, and talked to Tasuku with an obvious liking for him~~!"

"Ugh."

That was too unexpected. Well, to me, Chiaki didn't feel too different than before. I thought that her long seaweed head suited her 'real persona' more... Wait, these weren't important.

Anyway, Chiaki was now acknowledged as a beauty in the entire school. When such a girl... one that loves gaming took a liking for Uehara-san, Aguri-san who fell for him because of gaming felt uneasy about it.

I tried speaking up for Uehara-san with a wry smile:

"B-But Aguri-san, you also said before that Tendo-san and Uehara-san are compatible, right?"

"That's two different matters! Because Tendo-san feels like she is out of reach. And... Tasuku is the coolest guy in the whole world, he is too good for me..."

"....."

"What's with those eyes of yours?"

"Ah, nothing. Just felt turned off by others raving about their love life."

"What?"

"Nothing. Uehara-san is awesome. He is super cool!"

"What are you saying? Disgusting."

"Then what do you want me to do!?"

Too unreasonable! In a sense, Aguri-san was as hard to handle as Tendo-san in my heart! Chiaki was a pain to deal with too... Hmm? Could it be, all girls were troubling for me? No, no way...

Aguri-san dug up the ice in her honey melon soda with her straw.

"While we are busying ourselves with all that, Tasuku seemed to be

seeing that Hoshinomori Chiaki much more often..."

"Isn't that because of your plan to 'keep some distance from Tasuku' failed...?"

"Huh?"

"Sorry, that is also my fault. I don't know why, but it's all my fault."

But if she was willing to accompany Uehara-san after school, things won't turn out this way... And I was dragged by her to stalk them too. I actually wanted to play games...

"And the most critical part..."

"Ah... You mean that day?"

That day Chiaki and Uehara-san chatted in the park alone... Known as X-day. Although Aguri-san and I were the only ones to use that word.

But that time was really damning. I was careless and thought Chiaki was not a problem, Aguri-san was much cuter than her anyway... But that day, my opinion was completely crushed. His stunning words shattered Aguri-san's hopes.

That's right... That day, as we watched Uehara-san from afar--

He grabbed Chiaki's shoulders, and shouted with serious eyes:

"This is too compatible a match ahhhhh!!!!!"

"....."

As we thought back to the situation back then, the family restaurant fell into depression again. No matter what... that was too absurd. To be honest, it was a huge blow to me too. Leaving Chiaki aside... I never imagined... Uehara to be someone who would do that to another girl despite having a girlfriend.

Aguri-san continued: “And then...”

“... Amano-chi, didn’t you say this after that? ‘I made up my mind! No matter what... I will make Uehara-san come to his senses!’ I felt a bit touched by that unexpectedly manly announcement of yours. Did you not say that?”

“I-I did say that...”

Well, I was sincere about that. I also felt responsible for this incident for Aguri-san, and I was serious about supporting her after spending time with her. That was why I made up my mind, but...

Aguri-san screamed at me again:

“Amano-chi, why did four boys and girls including you form a Gamers Hobby Group so intimately aaaaaahhhhhhhhhh!”

“I don’t know either aaaaaahhhhhhhhhh!”

After shouting at each other, we were shushed by the employee: “Please keep your voice down...” After we apologized to everyone in the restaurant, we sank back into our seats weakly.

... I said quietly:

"Sorry... The formation of the Gamers Hobby Group was my mistake. I was too careless... and happy about it, and forgot that Chiaki and Uehara-san would meet each other more... But Tendo-san joining was really out of the blue..."

I never imagined-- that Uehara-san would woo Tendo-san at the same time! But it would make sense then. Recently, Tendo-san has been talking to me more, so her interest in Uehara-san was the reason.

.....

... Huh, what is this? My heart hurts a lot just now. Even though I

am not that shameless to think anything can happen between Tendo-san and me. How strange.

As I was confused by my complicated feelings, Aguri-san sighed.

“... Sorry Amano-chi, I also know... that it's not your fault... Thank you Amano-chi. It seems like... I made you accompany me a lot recently.”

"Aguri-san..."

"So... you are not a disgusting, nerdy boy with BL tendency..."

She paused for a moment, then smiled gently.

“But a kind-hearted, disgusting, nerdy boy with BL tendency.”

“I don't feel happy about that upgrade at all! And why am I still suspected of BL!?”

"..... Sigh. The truth is, I could feel since I started dating Tasuku... that he is probably not that interested in me.”

Aguri-san smiled bitterly as she fiddled with the water droplets on the cup. My mood also turned sour.

"... Even so, your feelings for Uehara-san remains the same, right?"

"Ah, yes of course!"

Aguri-san smiled without any doubt in her heart. I stiffened my face.

“It feels like... Because you always seem so sad, so I don't really get it. Are you... fine with that?”

“Ahaha, it's not a matter of me being fine with it. I like him means I like him, there is no helping it.”

“B-But think about it, if both parties fall for someone whom they

can converse more comfortably with--"

For some reason, the image of Tendo-san's face kept flashing across my mind. That's right, I shouldn't push myself up this unscalable wall, I need to be more practical about this, or else...

"Ahaha, Amano-chi, you are really stupid!"

"...Huh?"

I took a look, and Aguri-san was gazing my way with a 'what are you saying?' expression on her face. She said with a nonchalant tone, as if she was regurgitating the truth of the world:

"Love, isn't something that you plan for, but something you fall into unknowingly."

"....."

"When you encounter such a situation, you can't help it, it is like meeting with an accident. Even if it hurts, even if you are not good enough for the other person... Well, since you have fallen, it can't be helped."

"A-Aguri-san..."

W-Why do I feel so sad too!? I wasn't a man mature enough to meddle in other's love affairs... Even so...

"A-Aguri-san!"

"? Amano-chi?"

I couldn't help clasping her hand, and announcing firmly!

"I-I will do my best to help you two get back together!"

"Amano-chi! Yes, thank you! Let's work hard together!"

"Ok!"

"Huh? Wait wait."

"? What's the matter?"

As we clasped our hands in a show of camaraderie, Aguri-san suddenly looked out the window of the family restaurant.

"Inside the bus that stopped at the traffic light just now... I think Hoshinomori Chiaki is inside..."

"? Yes, I remember the bus to her place goes in this direction..."

"That so... ah."

Aguri-san found herself holding my hand, and looked a little flustered.

"What should we do, what if she misunderstands..."

"Ah, it will be fine, Aguri-san. Because I already mustered my courage like a man and told her how compatible a couple you and Uehara-san are!"

"Oh~~! How did you say it? Tell me tell me."

In response to the intrigued Aguri-san, I puffed out my chest and said:

"I told her: 'Aguri-san is the most thoughtful girlfriend!' 'A girlfriend as pretty, cute, and unbeatable can't be found anywhere else! Incredible right?!' And I also did this 'absolute Aguri declaration' to Chiaki at the best moment!"

"Woah, as expected of Amano-chi, how manly!"

"Hehehe, you flatter me. Chiaki's reaction was like: 'T-That's great'. So stoic that it bothers me, but she is definitely putting on a strong front!"

"Wow you helped me so much! Then I... will also support you to



pay you back! Alright, it's decided! Even if I have to occasionally turn down Tasuku's invitation, I will still accompany you, until you can talk to Tendo-san as an equal! A woman will never go back on her word!"

"Y-You are too kind! Thank you, Aguri-san!"

"It's no trouble. Let's work together for each other's benefit in the future, Amano-chi!"

"Okay! I will be in your care, Aguri-san!"

At the table of this family restaurant, we clasped our hands in a manly fashion as a sign of our friendship.

And so, Aguri and I successfully formed an 'alliance'...

However, we didn't realize at this point that the creation of this strange 'alliance' would cause more problems for us in the future... And wasn't aware of it until our high school days were over.

## Footnotes

1. [\[↑\]](#) アメトーク Ame Talk. It's a variety TV show in Japan.

# Epilogue

It had been two weeks since the founding of the ‘Gamers Hobby Group’.

Today, I attended the Group’s activity after school as usual, then went home for dinner with my family of four. I then idle my mind in my room, and browsed the websites I usually frequent.

In the end, there wasn’t much progress in all sorts of ways.

We started the ‘Gamers Hobby Group’, but the truth was, Chiaki and I still fight all the time. And for some reasons, Tendo-san didn’t join the Group, which was a pity. If only she was around, Chiaki and I would settle down more...

Don’t Tendo-san like Uehara-san?

I didn’t understand why she didn’t join the Group, but my heart will ache whenever I thought about this, so I decided not to delve too deep.

There was still a distance between Aguri-san and Uehara-san. Or rather, I feel there was a gulf between Uehara-san and me too. He didn’t make any obvious strange moves... But I could feel the distance between us, and he seemed to be observing me.

And so, Aguri-san and I had lots of complaint session and reflection session, and would visit that family restaurant every other day to vent. But fortunately, thanks to Aguri-san’s help, I don’t feel that flustered when I speak to someone for the first time anymore, and I could converse with Tendo-san when I met her. But for some reasons, Tendo-san stammers a lot, so we still couldn’t hold a smooth conversation... I need to work even harder.

Oh right, the only proper progress in these two weeks would be Chiaki finishing her game. The time needed to make free games

varies, but she was considerably fast. Was Chiaki unexpectedly talented? I didn't want to acknowledge that though.

In the end, Chiaki went in the direction of making her work 'acceptable by most people'. But she had a look of accomplishment on her face when she said that. No matter what type of work it was, maybe it would be good enough if one put their effort into it... Sigh, I wasn't a creator anyway, so I wouldn't know.

However, there was one thing I couldn't accept, that would be Chiaki refusing to reveal her internet handle to me. She seemed to hope that I would never get to play it in my lifetime. But she seemed to have told Uehara-san, which made me so vexed... I would find out sooner or later.

-- As I recalled these things aimlessly while I surf the net, my eyes fell on the rare news of a certain blog posting new content. It was the blog of NOBE. From the content, it seemed to be a notification that he completed his latest game.

"Oh, awesome!"

I immediately downloaded it to try. I actually planned to play another game on my game console, but that can wait.

In the game, NOBE's game was a short AVG (adventure game) that could be completed in two hours. Surprisingly, there wasn't any super development, and despite being short, the content was properly executed.

But because of that, it lacked the usual taste of NOBE.

After reaching the ending, I read the 'afterword' that appeared as the ending credit and went to NOBE's blog. I opened the comments section that remained empty.

After tidying my thoughts, I left a short message as usual.

<I saw a new side of NOBE this time. This game is interesting and

well made too! Thank you! - Yamasan!>

After writing that, I posted my comment. My comments were usually short. I considered writing a long passage on my thoughts in the beginning, but as the words started accumulating, I feel it was starting to drift from my true feelings. Hence, I decided that conveying the message that the 'game was very enjoyable' would be enough. And of course, I didn't hope for any reply, I was just expressing my thanks for getting to play an interesting game.

"Alright."

I stopped what I was doing, took a bath, brushed my teeth and got ready to turn in.

After rousing my computer from sleep mode, NOBE's blog was still open.

Without thinking too much, I pressed the refresh page button to check for any posting about his next work... And--

Hmm? The comments section... have two messages?

The blog didn't have any new content, but I noticed two comments on the latest post. It was probably someone else sharing their thoughts, I opened the comment section with a relaxed mood.

I then saw--

<Thank you for your support all this while. - NOBE>

-- A short and simple message on it.

"..... I should be thanking you."

I felt my heart warming... to be frank, I felt touched, but I didn't write a reply and closed the window quietly.

Strange? I think I saw those words somewhere before... Well, never mind.

For no particular reason, I felt like sleeping early tonight. I got onto my bed after turning off the computer.

When I closed my eyes, the screen from NOBE's latest game appeared before me.

Speaking of which, NOBE's style changed a lot this time.

His usual style that was too unique, cocky and introvert changed drastically.

There was a huge cast of characters, each with their clear personality and viewpoint. They would some time activate their powers through portable consoles and devolve into intensive fights. But everything was resolved with a happy ending. That was a heartwarming game--

-- A masterpiece named 'Gamers'.

But the characters appearing in the game seemed to be inserts of people around me recently, that surprised me. And there are elements of 'MOE' this time too, although it's just a little. As expected of 'NOBE', her taste just hit the right spot.

I felt very blissed after playing a great game.

In my sleepy mind, the smiles of Uehara-san, Chiaki, Tendo-san and Aguri appeared.

My everyday life... is becoming lively...

Even now, I still felt this was incredible.

There was nothing harder for me to accept than a main character who likes a normal peaceful life.

This thought of mine remained unchanged even after this hectic month.

I would question what was so average about a guy so popular with

beauties, and I wasn't that noble in spirit to cherish my old life that was boring and never changing with the perspective that 'peace is great'.

However... If I had to say what changed in my heart, there would be just one point.

I-- Amano Keita, 16 years old.

The fact was, my urge to go to another world had gradually dwindled.

How strange... In the past, I will fantasize about a faraway world before I sleep. But recently... I realized I had been thinking about 'tomorrow'.

Grabbing the edge of the blanket, I curled my body. What appeared in my mind wasn't a fantasy world, but Uehara-san, Tendo-san, Aguri-san..... and I guess Chiaki's smile.

... Since things turned out like this in this world, I had to admit even if it vexed me.

I admit that my everyday life right now... well, felt really charming.

Eh, despite that, compared to harem main characters, such a daily life is still incredibly shabby. I had a new male friend, a person I admire, and started cheering for the girlfriend of my friend. On top of that... ah, there's seaweed too.

In the end, there was just one person I could call a friend with confidence. Even though I got to know more girls... My relationship was only to that extent. I didn't have a girlfriend.

In conclusion, gauging from the average normie scale of having several friends and a lover, I wasn't doing that great, and might even be beneath the curve. Honestly speaking, I was still alone after school was out, and would even wander around campus out of boredom.

But no matter what others think, to me--

Tomorrow... who would I... chat about games with... how exciting...

-- I finally got the blissful daily life that made me shed tears of joy.

And so--

And so, the story that I want to tell--

Went against the preference I have for tales, and was rather regrettable.

After going about all this, in the end.

The story still started with an average main character being chatted up by a beautiful girl--

-- This was a story about games, a touching tale that pulls on your heartstrings.



# Extra Story - Tendo Karen and Detrimental Upgrade

## ***Tendo-san's elegant day BEFORE***

Tendo Karen got up very early in the morning.

Jogging, morning study, club self training. Making full use of the conducive environment in the morning to increase her concentration, she could improve herself efficiently.

But on the other hand, Tendo groomed herself very quick and simply. Others might not know, but she was the type who didn't pay too much attention to her appearance. She paid the minimum attention to her dressing, and felt it was her personality on the inside that was the most important.

After reaching school early, Tendo would focus on socializing with her classmates. Because her belief was to give her all in doing the things that could only be done at a particular time.

Tendo not only interact with her classmates after class, she would take the initiative to help the teacher. Instead of trying to score points in giving a good impression, this only happened because she value the unique experience she could get from performing this task. Instead of chatting idly with her friends in the classroom, she thinks taking action would be more efficient use of her time.

For her, afternoon recess was a troubling time. For some reasons, she didn't like being tied down after school, so afternoon recess had a high chance of becoming 'confession rejection time'.

Tendo had gotten used to being confessed to, but the heartache from turning down the goodwill of others still bit at her. Even so, in order to share the pain of the other party, even just for a tiny bit, the

most sincere thing she could do was look at the other party in the eye and reject them clearly.

And so, after she attended all her classes, the time after school was the most blissful moment for Tendo.

Although Tendo Karen didn't inform this to most people around her, she was a member of the Gamers Club.

That wasn't a serene place where you could play games leisurely, but a venue for people to grind their video game skills with each other. Tendo loved the serious competitive atmosphere that was ever present in there.

After partaking for an average of two hours in club activities, Tendo would head home, study and review her homework, relax by collecting gaming news. After her preparation for the next day of school, she would turn in early to prepare herself for the next day.

And so, Tendo Karen's day would proceed without pause elegantly.

... Originally, she should be spending her days like this.

Until she met him.

### ***Tendo-san's elegant day AFTER***

Tendo Karen got up very early in the morning.

Jogging, morning study, club self training. Making full use of the conducive environment in the morning to increase her concentration, she could improve herself efficiently... However--

"...~~!~~!"

She omitted the jogging and self training (basically, playing video games) part.

The reason was... she couldn't get out of bed. It wasn't because she

wanted to sleep. It was the opposite.

Because... She was covering her face with her blanket, and rolling around with her eyes wide open.

W-W-Why did I dream about Amano-kun!? A-And the c-content is so shameless... After all, t-that sort of scenario...!

Tendo Karen relive the scenes of her dream and kept rolling around while fluttering her legs for several times... In a sense, this might burn more calories than jogging.

In the end, she rolled around for almost an hour after waking up before she composed herself. She then groomed herself very quick and simply... Not.

S-Strange. The way my fringe looked bothers me... Ah, I need to trim my lashes... Should I change my lipstick... Hmm? A-Ara, it's already this late!

Despite spending much more time on her makeup, she still managed to reach her school at about the same time as usual, and started socializing with her classmates... After a few superficial words, she wandered to the entrance of Class F although she didn't need to pass by that area for any reason.

... Is Amano-kun here yet? ... He's not here. Really, how can he not come to school earlier, Amano-kun is always like this. I-It's not because I want to see his face sooner. As a fellow game enthusiast, we should promote a healthy way of interaction... Ah, I-I don't mean interaction in that sense. I mean our interaction through gaming--

"Huh... Why is Tendo-san wandering outside our class in a daze every morning recently?"

"W-Who knows? There must be a deep reason behind this. She is Tendo-san after all."

"That's right. She is Tendo-san after all..."

Probably because Tendo Karen had always been prominent, she didn't realize that there were many obviously curious gazes falling on her as she wasted loads of her morning's time away.

However, her actions would suddenly end when a certain student -- Amano Keita reaches school. When he reached, he would naturally catch sight of Tendo, and muster his courage:

"Ah, Tendo-sa--"

Halfway through his greeting, Tendo Karen would turn and walk towards Class A, as if she was emphasizing that she 'didn't notice Amano-kun at all'. So the two of them never greet each other. By the way, Amano would be deflated; Tendo would blush; and Uehara would smile deviously in a great mood whenever he saw this. This scene would repeat itself every time. When class was over, Tendo would not just chat with her classmates, she would take the initiative to help her teacher.

"Eh... Tendo-san? I appreciate your help in carrying the teaching materials, but these need to go to the chemistry lab..."

"Yes, I understand. Leave it to me, teacher."

"Hmm... Alright... Erm, Tendo-san? That's not even the long way there, it's the completely opposite direction..."

"It will be fine, Sensei. I will pass by Class F and make sure the items are delivered. (all smiles)"

"Huh? That's great... Well, why do you have to pass by Class F..."

"I will make sure the items are delivered, don't worry. (all smiles)"

"Ah, right. Thank you."

... And so, Tendo Karen continued to help her teacher earnestly. Instead of trying to score points in giving a good impression, this only happened because she value the unique experience she could get from

performing this task... By the way, the unique experience here include 'she could pretend to be over encumbered by the teaching materials, so she could slow down and look at a certain background character type loner gamer boy from through the door of Class F'. To be honest, that was ninety percent of the reason.

After that would be afternoon recess, which was a troubling time for her. Because afternoon recess had a high chance of becoming 'confession rejection time', and she was becoming worse at this as time goes by. The reason was...

"Why... Why won't you go out with me!? As expected... as expected, someone like me can't match up to you right!?"

The words of a boy from her same grade resounded at the back of the school campus. It was as good as their first meeting, but Tendo responded calmly and: "No, that's not it. There are no main reasons. First of all, sorry, I don't know you very well. And of course, I think we could still be friends in the future. There is another reason why I can't date you, because I don't have any--"

Desire to date a boy-- When Tendo was about to finish her usual speech, the boy pressed her unexpectedly:

"Could it be... you have someone you like, Tendo-san!?"

"Hmm?"

The sudden question made Tendo Karen's brain freeze. No, if it was the usual her, she would dismiss it with a smile and say: "No, that's not it." and then explain she didn't want to date anyone right now. However, now...

For some reasons, she seemed different from the famous Tendo Karen... Her face was beet red, demeanour flustered, head bowed low as she gave a muffled and incoherent reply while covering her mouth.

"Hmm? N-No, I don't have anyone I like, y-you idiot, how could that, be. N-N-No, that's not it, I don't have, don't have any intention

of dating... anyone..... Ah! I-I am not! I am not fantasizing about dating someone and feeling so blissed!"

"? Hmm? W-What? Erm... Sorry, what did you just say...? What do you think after hearing my confession...?"

"Ah, I totally don't want to accept. Zero willingness."

"How harsh!"

"Ah, I misspoke, sorry! W-Weird, I-I usually won't turn people down so cruelly, please don't misunderstand. Ah, but I really can't date you--"

And so, when Tendo Karen turns down confessions in recent time, it would somehow end in a mess. For her, afternoon recess was much more troubling than before.

But after she attended all her classes, the time after school was the most blissful moment for Tendo-- that used to be true.

"...Tendo? Tendo!"

"Ah."

The hot babe game maniac Oiso Nina of the Gamers Club-- usually addressed as Nina-senpai called out to her, and Tendo Karen reacted with a start. She then realized the fighting game character she was controlling had lost a perfect defeat.

Oiso said to the dazed Tendo worriedly:

"You seem to be spacing out a lot recently... Are you okay?"

"Ah, yes, sorry... Recently, I will get lost in thought without realizing it. What's wrong with me...?"

"Well, it's fine since your health is fine... Then, what do you usually think about?"

“... Well, I couldn’t find anything in common... Eh, bits of unrelated memories would flash through my mind...”

“Oh~~ For example?”

“Well... Even though Nina-senpai is amazing, you definitely couldn’t find what they have in common...”

After her opening disclaimer, Tendo Karen started recounting with a serious but troubled manner.

“For example, the first time I chatted up Amano-kun at the game shop; or when I invited Amano-kun to the Gamers Club; and the time I went to Amano-kun’s class; and when I got invited to Amano-kun’s Gamers Hobby Group; and how Amano-kun is alone in class today too; it would be great if Amano-kun comes to school earlier; and why won’t Amano-kun join the Gamers Club? How maddening; and what exactly is Amano-kun’s relationship with those girls around him? Also, the thing I recalled the most was the scene when I run into Amano-kun praising our club strongly when he was leaving for home from the arcade. These scenes kept replaying in my mind.... Fufu.”

"....."

"... Sigh. Ah~~ even thinking about this way, I couldn’t make sense of them. Right, Nina-senpai? I had been wondering what these things have in common-- hmm strange? Nina-senpai, where are you going!? Why do you have the look of not being able to take it anymore!? Wait, only the two of us are here today, where do you want to go... Ugh, hey~~ Senpai!"

That was why, even her Gamers Club activities wasn’t going too well.

After club activities was over, Tendo would head home, study and review her homework, relax by collecting gaming news. After her preparation for the next day of school, she would turn in early to prepare herself for the next day. And so...

Will Amano-kun stop by the Gamers Club tomorrow? ... Ah, i-it wouldn't improve the quality of the Gamers Club even if he comes, and I don't really hope for him to come! Eh, b-but if he does come, I wouldn't be against that. Yes, in that case, I will lay the foundation of his gaming skills for him... Fufu... Fufufufu...

After she fell asleep while thinking about all this, she would naturally dream about Amano Keita acting out a scene that made her face blush and her heart race... Which led to her rolling around in bed the next morning.

And so, today, Tendo Karen--

Spent the day elegantly in a different sense from the past.





# Credits

Translation by [[SkyTheWood](#)].

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